STORIES OF STRANGE HAPPENINGS

DOLF WYLLARDE

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STORIES OF STRANGE HAPPENINGS

BY

DOLF WYLLARDE

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CONTENTS

		PAGE
I.	"I Heard Voices——"	7
II.	The Passion of Susan Tremlett	31
III.	"Hear it Unaware"	92
IV.	The Ten Talents	111
V.	Yesterday	136
VI.	The Changeling	152
VII.	The Benefit of the Doubt	195
VIII.	The Sinless Summer	215
IX.	Nothing	269

The characters in this book are all imaginary and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name.

STORIES OF STRANGE HAPPENINGS

I

"I HEARD VOICES—"

"THERE'S nothing in it really," said the Agent. "It's a caretaker's job. The wells are sealed down, but the derricks are derelict, and the office building hasn't been removed. Of course it should have been, but as it hasn't somebody has got to see that it doesn't go bit by bit."

"It must have been a pretty large settlement," said Fyldes, out of his wonder. "To have had offices?"

"They kept a log while drilling, and had their own geologist. It hummed like a beehive at one time," agreed the Agent, confidentially. It was extraordinary, Fyldes thought, that his confidence never betrayed anything. "There were bungalows, quite a colony. They're all gone but one. However, you'll find that habitable, I think. Your wife coming with you?"

"Yes. I understood——"

"Oh yes. The Boss was married, and some of the staff. It's just as well." He seemed so satisfied that it aroused revolt in Fyldes. Why should it be a satisfactory arrangement to bring a white woman out to such desolation? He asked sharply:

"Are there natives?"

"There's a karia or so. You'll find them good servants. Unfortunately they are incurable thieves. But timid ones.

They won't steal your property—as long as you are there."

"That being the reason——"

"Exactly. Some of the office has already been removed, I'm afraid. Not the structure. Oh no. But there were some desks, fittings, you know. Irresistible, I suppose."

"It sounds very lonely."

"Well, that's the drawback. The nearest place is this port town—not a large one, as you see. And it's some ten miles over the desert. But your wife will be with you."

"Yes," said Fyldes again, hurriedly. "These natives —in the case of danger?"

"There is none. I can assure you of that. No wild beasts or hostile tribes. Nothing but waste land, uninhabited by man or beast. Take a revolver with you, but you won't need it. As to the natives, they would run away!"

"It is just the loneliness then." Curious how they both came back to that.

"Socially a drawback. For a man with resources in himself I should say it was none. But if you do not care to take it up——"

"I must," said Fyldes baldly, with something more in his manner than that of a man who is short of a job since the war. The Agent did not ask questions any more than he answered them. He took Fyldes' papers, and signed him on as being in charge of the derelict oil-wells at Al Gran. But Fyldes had the feeling that he withheld information rather than did not volunteer it.

"I forgot to tell you that there is a transmitting station there—your job in the war, wasn't it? You'll be quite at home with it, then. And one pony." He laughed for the first time.

"One!" said Fyldes. "I suppose I can get another for my wife?"

"You couldn't get fodder enough for two. The natives bring you grain and dates, and there's some silage. You'll get a gallop over the sand if you want exercise, but you can only go in one direction."

"The same ride—day after day ?"

"It's a pity. But the other routes are only fit for camels. That's why you can't use a car. Nothing with wheels. Half the trouble at the wells has been transport. The tractors couldn't work. You'll go out by camel train. Good day. You'll take up the post at once, of course ?"

"I will cable to my wife. She is in Suez. I am afraid she can't get here until Thursday. But I might go out first."

"She would have to come out to you with a native sayyir. I'm afraid I could not spare a European—the port is so small. I should think it would be better for you to wait for her, in the circumstances."

"In the circumstances, yes."

There was a faint irony in the acquiescence, but the Agent did not appear to notice shades of tone. When Mrs. Fyldes arrived on the Thursday her husband went down to the Arab dhau in which she had crossed—for no regular line of steamers came to Port Omar—and brought her to the Agency until the means of their transport could be procured. She proved to be younger than her husband, but she had a curious likeness to him in the expression of her eyes, which were at once resentful of fate and resigned to it. The Agent understood that Captain Fyldes had left his regiment but recently, and since then had been unsuccessful in his pursuit of employment, until now. It was a big problem for any man and woman not many years married. Mrs. Fyldes made even fewer inquiries as to the managership at Al Gran oil-fields than her husband. Her only remark to the Agent was "We were very lucky to

get a job at all." It would not have surprised him so much if she had asked him how many had refused it before their advent on the scene. He divined that they had seen the advertisement at Cairo, and come to Suez, whence Captain Fyldes had crossed to Port Omar to offer himself in person. Mrs. Fyldes' appearance did not suggest hurried travelling under Arab escort. She had remained dustless and tidy. But her arrival on the spot proved that she had successfully carried through the journey from inward civilisation to its outer limit.

The camels were ready by the afternoon, two for riding, and other beasts literally of burden. Such household necessaries as the place demanded the Fyldes had obtained in Omar, from the Agent's advisory list, and their own baggage was by no means excessive. They shook hands with the Agent as if they regretted parting from him, and he saw the small caravan go out of the mud-walled town and into the sands that lay immediately around it, their shadows bobbing before them in the afternoon light. The Arabs and their camels would return before night—no one ever stayed in Al Gran since the wells were closed down, save the man in charge and the forlorn race of natives stranded in its vicinity. They were bastards, not tribal, and mostly of African origin; but they had been drawn into the whirlpool of the oil-fields when they were first being worked and life hummed round them, the karias springing up with the bungalows, like varied forms of mushroom growth. When the bungalows were pulled down and taken away, and the white people departed, the native village remained, half starved out but too inert to desert the closed wells which had been the motive for its existence.

The camel train arrived at its destination an hour before the sun set, passing through the native village first and

reaching the old settlement some half-mile farther on. The camels were unloaded briskly, and with nothing but their drivers to carry they turned back to Port Omar at a canter. It seemed incredible how fast they disappeared, a little dust on the rough track they had made being all that was left of them in a very short time.

Captain and Mrs. Fyldes stood at the door of their bungalow and looked after them across the humpy sand in silence. They had not been able to speak to each other on the journey, and they did not seem inclined to make up for it now. Side by side in the dusty verandah of their forlorn habitation they stood and looked at their domain, and the solitude seemed to make a mockery of humanity's pretence to rule the desert.

Sand, and sand, and sand, in little hillocks and ridges up to the horizon. To the right a line of sandstone rocks rising to pinnacles that looked like broken teeth, and at their feet the abandoned wells and the litter of a ruined industry. The tanks had been taken away, but the derricks stood, gaunt and useless, like dishonoured skeletons. It was so ugly and so hopeless that the two human beings instinctively turned their eyes away in search of something better.

There had evidently been some twenty or thirty bungalows in the settlement, though all trace of them had gone except the foundations on which they had stood. The one left standing for the manager was sun-baked and dilapidated, with sand drifted into the verandahs; but it showed signs of recent habitation. Fyldes' predecessor had evidently scuttled out as soon as he was permitted by the Agent, to make room for a new tenant, leaving behind him the bare tables and chairs and bedsteads that belonged to the place and for which the patient camels had carried the Fyldes' bedding and furnishing. The key of the

bungalow had been handed to the new manager before he left the port.

The only other building of the Settlement left standing besides the bungalow was one that had evidently been the office, and to which the Agent had referred. It stood out conspicuously, being two-storied, and imposed itself remorselessly upon the monotonous landscape. The lower floor had apparently been nothing but a storehouse, shuttered with jalousies between the pillars that supported the upper floor. A wooden staircase led to the office from the outside of the building, and the broken window-frames above witnessed to the deprivations of the natives. This building was the last remnant and testimony to the days of the oil-fields when the Settlement began its mushroom life and "hummed like a hive." The office, out there in the sands, suggested schemes, a prophetic success that its dilapidation made the more incredible.

Fyldes' inspection of his new premises was almost spell-bound in its dull surprise. He had not, somehow, expected it to be quite like this. He was roused from the stupor into which he seemed to have fallen by a touch on his arm, and turned to find a thin dark native at his elbow. The man was dressed in dirty linen, without any shoes, and his head bound round with a dirtier turban. He asked, in dumb show, for the keys.

"What do you want?" asked Fyldes sharply. He felt the loneliness of his position suddenly, and his responsibility to the woman who had accompanied him. Not so much as his wife, as simply a woman. "What do you want?"

"Supper, Sahib."

Then Fyldes saw that two other men, dirtier and more ragged, had been unpacking the bales brought by the camels, and that his household necessities must evidently

be brought in at once and some sort of meal prepared before the natives went home. He had been warned that the servants arrived at sunrise and departed at sunset. He handed the keys to the head-man, and watched them carry in the things, standing on the verandah in his position of authority but not lowering his prestige by helping them. They worked far more deftly than he had expected, and had put the place somewhat to rights in a very short time. They must, he supposed, have been used to service with his predecessor.

His wife had quietly gone into the bungalow as soon as her trunks were brought in, and was unpacking for herself. She had taken possession of one of the bedrooms and left the other to him. He walked through the place and found it unexpectedly roomy, though so shabby and uninviting that it turned his depression into something like despair.

There were two bedrooms and two sitting-rooms; a bathroom, where the zinc tubs already stood filled with brackish water from the wells that supplied Al Gran, a kitchen and outside offices. On three sides of the bungalow ran the verandah netted in against the flies. The place had been swept clean, if not scrubbed. In the dining-room—so called from courtesy—the filters had been filled from some purer source than the brackish wells, and the rough ware they had brought with them was set upon the table.

"To-morrow Al Sitt unpack, and I lay cloth!" said the head-man solemnly.

This reversion to civilised methods brought home the reality of it all to Fyldes as nothing else had done. It was not a picnic, a rest-house on the way between one normal life and another—they were here permanently, their life to be lived between the narrow walls of the bungalow and the illimitable desert.

He went to his wife's door and knocked, calling out

"Doreen!" to tell her who was there. Her name in such a place struck him as tragic.

"Yes?" She did not open the door.

"You had better come to supper. It is being cooked."

She came into the dining-room a minute later, cool and tidy, all signs of travel removed from her except the shadows beneath her large eyes and the lines round her tired mouth. Those lines! They were permanent also, graven there in the last few months.

The head-man brought in a dish of curry and rice, well cooked, and bread. He set them simply on the table and asked leave to go.

"To-morrow," he said, "I come and get the breakfast and do the washing up. Are there any more orders?"

"Where is the pony?" said Fyldes, remembering what the Agent had said. "Is he fed?"

"The last man took him to the port. To-morrow I bring him back."

"The *Sahib* who was here before me?" said Fyldes, with a slight emphasis.

"No, Sahib," said the native simply. "Syrian."

He bowed himself out into the verandah with the obeisance of the slave race from which he probably came, and they heard his running feet almost as soon as he left the bungalow. This hurry to leave, both of the camel drivers and the native servants, struck Fyldes for the first time. He hoped that Doreen had not noticed it also. She only spoke of their circumstances once during the meal.

"I do not understand why the wells were closed down."

"Oh, the usual thing. They became sanded up and were not worth working."

"Still, I do not understand."

"They drill into water sometimes below the oil-sands, and the whole show collapses and gets choked."

She did not comment further except to remark, "That Agent told us nothing."

Silence quivered and dropped between them again. He had a fear that if they spoke it would lead to the old dreary recrimination, and that she knew it also. They went to bed early because it was impossible to sit there with the bright glare of a reflector lamp between them, the smell of the desert in their nostrils, and no word to pass in safety their unsafe lips. To-morrow must be more normal. To-morrow they would unpack their more personal belongings, such as books and tools. To-morrow held the key to their endurance.

Fyldes did not expect to sleep much at such an early hour. The fatigue and heat of the day, the anxieties of the journey out from the port, the strange conditions on arrival, were enough to rack his nerves. He tossed to and fro in the narrow camp bed, and thought of a thousand things that were unimportant. When he tried to sleep his brain was teased by the impression of a gramophone playing nearby—outside, he thought—as some people hear church bells ringing in their heads. When he listened it was gone. There was nothing in his room, which was packed with the black velvet of darkness. But so soon as he began to think of other things there was that senseless rhythm. He could almost fancy the tune—it was "Shepherd of the Hills." At midnight it ceased to worry him and he slept.

In the morning the native arrived with the monotony of the rising sun. He was already in the kitchen, making coffee, when Fyldes got up, and brought hot water for shaving. His name, he said, was Cassim. Fyldes commented to Doreen that it sounded like the Arabian Nights, and she said "Yes." That was all. They ate their breakfast together, and agreed that each should go their

own way and find their occupation without reference to the other. If the life were to be lived at all, they saw that this was the only possible way.

Doreen went straight to the second sitting-room, and began to unpack her books. She would need shelves, and asked him if he could make some. His hobby was carpentering, but he needed wood. In search of it he went over to the shell of the office and explored it. Perhaps there might be some fittings left by the natives of which he could make use. He had the key of the building as well as of the bungalow.

It had the same indescribable smell as the bungalow, but intensified. There was much sand on the floor and the fittings, which had drifted in through the broken jalousies, and it smelt of sand and dust and timber that has been baked through and through with the sun. But it impressed him anew with its ghastly importance, so that he saw it in fancy when it was an expression of everyday work and routine to unknown human beings. The light wooden desks had once been polished. The chairs or stools were gone, but the desks, being screwed to the floor, had not been removed. There were facilities for sampling formations from the wells, and an office table partially screened where someone in authority might have sat. The place was so full of impressions that it drove him backwards, out of it, like physical force. He felt that he had intruded, that something asked him his business —waited for the reply.

Locking the door again he locked in the past busy days of the office with it, and returned to the bungalow, where he sought and found Cassim and asked him to bring out some seasoned wood that could be used for shelves. He did not know how it was to be obtained—quite possibly filched from the office which he would not, himself,

desecrate—but the native received the order with a gravity that promised fulfilment. He seemed to regard Fyldes' demands as proof that he had been taken into favour, and his compliance made his new master wonder if it would be possible to use him as the medium for more ambitious desires. He wished that they had brought out a gramophone, the delusion of the night having put it into his mind, and played with the idea of it at intervals throughout the day. It would lighten the interminable evenings.

His mind needed the food of ideas and the exercise of its faculties in the days which followed. For it was soon revealed to him that in safeguarding themselves from the weakness of their own temperaments they had fallen upon worse disaster. Their dreadful suspicion of each other had not altered, they saw it in the eyes opposite them as in a looking-glass. They had segregated themselves from occasion to doubt; but the doubt was still there.

"He will not forgive me for it," she said to herself.

"She will never trust me again," he thought.

The procession of dusty days passed across the desert like a caravan, outlined against the sky and sand without more meaning than the moving-on of life. There being only the two of them they ceased to use each other's names, and with the lack of need for such came a lack of personality. It was as if they were become disembodied—ghosts—with no hold over or real reference to each other. Such converse as they had was of daily things; the feeding of the pony, which Fyldes saw to himself lest the grain should be stolen as soon as paid for, and the beast go short; the arrangement of the rooms; and the check upon the stores, and on Cassim; even the possible positions of the old bungalows and the meaning of a large empty space of sand in the centre which had been cleared of camel thorn and bore some likeness to a parade

ground. But they never could guess its use. Of more intimate things they dared not speak. They lived as estranged as enemy countries on each side of a boundary of territory.

Once during the first month the Agent from Port Omar came out to see that all was well. They welcomed him as men in lighthouses may welcome the relief, made him a little banquet with tinned stores, and talked to him as they might to a whole community. He asked if there were any complaints of the natives, and said that reports had reached him of some disorder.

"We have seen none," said Fyldes. "Cassim is a good indoor servant, and the two men he brings with him as carriers keep us well supplied with fresh water and dates."

"They have tidied you up a bit. They would not work for the last man—he had a lot of trouble about it."

"They have learned somewhere," said Doreen with faint wonder. "Cassim knows European ways."

"They were constantly employed when the wells were working. I have no doubt they were pretty well trained, if they have not forgotten."

"I think Cassim had a faint hope that we were going to work the oil-fields again. He asked my husband when we first came. But he seems quite resigned."

"What was the disorder you referred to?" said Fyldes. He did not want to know. But it was something to think about.

"The date wine. They have their own means of making it. It's rank poison, of course—and they swill it raw."

"The date wine!"

"Beastly stuff. A man can get more drunk on it than on saki."

Fyldes looked at his wife with fierce eyes, knowing that she would not look at him. The date wine! A new

suspicion to cause canker between them. He would brazen it out.

"What does it taste like?" he asked deliberately. "I never knew they made wine from the dates."

"Musty, and hot like arrack when it's new. As bad as drinking methylated spirit. I kept some once for a year or so, out of curiosity. It never lost its peculiar taste or its potency; but it was rather nice. The Syrian drank it a lot. If you find Cassim in a kind of coma on the verandah, let me know, that's all."

A miserable conviction made Fyldes turn sick. It was not for himself. He had no fear of the date wine and its temptation to the Syrian. But it was as if he saw into his wife's mind, and the foreboding there, until he longed to shriek at her that she was wrong, wrong, wrong, and the hardness of her unfaith was killing him.

They heard no more of the trouble from the date wine and the natives. But a disturbance did occur that reached even to the bungalow in its effects.

One morning Cassim was late. Fyldes had to get up to heat his shaving water, and Doreen made the coffee for breakfast. He saw the conclusion in her eyes as they looked at him, and his own face in the glass was sullen. But Cassim was neither drunk nor disordered when he arrived later in the day and took up his duties.

"It was Abdullah's wife. We were killing her," he said in English. He could speak remarkably well for a native, but his choice of words was as simple as in Arabic, and startling in a more complex language. "Yes; she had committed adultery. We kill our women for that."

He went on cooking kid-mutton as though nothing had happened.

"Is that the law?" said Fyldes with stiff lips.

"It is our law," said Cassim.

A sound of a door being shut and locked. Doreen had walked into her own bedroom and turned the key. Was she afraid? of her husband? Oh woman, woman, hard in judgment for a fault not her own, and stricken to self-defence by this!——

Those raw touches upon an open sore made them flinch from each other as if the wrong were new.

They began to avoid each other. There being but one pony they took it in turns to ride, one this day and one the next. The beast was wiry and never seemed sore, though the track was of the roughest. There was only one way to ride, as the Agent had said. It began at the sandstone rocks that bounded the old wells, and went on along a ridge that skirted a shallow depression like a valley in the sand. On the ridge the going was smooth and hard enough for a gallop, and the pony always pulled coming home, so that Doreen's hands were sore. Just as the track reached the rocks again there was a circular hollow in them like an unroofed cave, and there he would drop to a walk. It was no use to urge him on. If she tried it he stood still, and for some minutes she had to wait at the hollow in the rocks. For reasons of her own Doreen did not wish to do this, and she let him walk. But she supposed that when her husband was riding his greater strength made itself felt and the pony recognised his authority, for he was always cantering when she caught sight of him coming into the Settlement.

They had held so little communication of late that one evening when she came home and seemed inclined to linger with him he was surprised. Usually she went straight to her room to change. He took the pony round to the empty zereba and fed him; but when he returned she was still on the verandah. She was examining her hand, which she held out to him.

"Look!" she said. "I have a blister. I am afraid it will break. Ali pulls coming home."

He was so surprised that he remained looking at her hand without speaking. There was a blister at the base of the little finger, as she said. He did not know what to say, it was so queer.

She had returned later than usual. Cassim had set the supper in the dining-room and gone home. The sun had set, and against the placid evening sky the jagged rocks were full of purple and brown hollows, a lovely phase of colour soon to fade into dim brown. The twilight was very short, but while it lasted it was eerie, and the desert had a new significance. It was no longer so flat. It seemed full of ridges that concealed an ambush.

Suddenly she drew close to him, brushing even against his arm with a trembling shoulder.

"Dick!" she said. "I must tell you. I am so frightened. Coming past the rocks—this evening—other evenings——"

"What is it?"

"I heard voices——"

His heart gave a dull thud like one who hears his own secret spoken aloud.

"Did you?" he said in an odd voice. "So did I!"

"You heard them too . . . talking?"

"I was afraid to tell you. I thought perhaps I was going dotty with the solitude. Impressions, you know."

They breathed hard in the silence as if they were both listening. Her voice came with a hiss through her teeth when she spoke.

"I thought so too, at first. It was so very slight, like an echo. But it's getting worse."

"Yes," he said.

"Clearer every time."

"Tell me what you heard—if you can."

"A jumble of voices—no words—as if several people were talking together. Always at that place, the hollow in the rocks. I'll tell you what it reminded me of—those picnics we used to have out at Heliopolis!"

"Everyone chattering at once? I know. And the laughter. Did you hear that too?"

"I heard it. They are laughing and talking. I can almost hear the chink of tea-cups now. But there's no one."

"Does Ali stop there with you?"

"Always."

"So he does with me."

By common consent they suddenly drew into the bungalow, walking shoulder to shoulder and close together as if their corporal nearness were a solace in the immense solitude round them. They could not stay on the verandah in the dusk. It was ghastly, and peopled with strange voices they were afraid to hear.

Fyldes lit the lamps in the dining-room and her bedroom, and they breathed freer. He had already had a bath and changed, but he lingered about while she did so as if to reassure her. The evening meal was generally a silent one, but to-night they began to talk, desperately, of trivial things, even of the past life at Abbasiyeh, as if to cheat the stillness. After dinner they carried the lamp into the sitting-room as usual, but though she opened a book Doreen went on talking in a lower tone.

"I've been thinking, Dick. That place by the rocks—it was their picnic place. I'm sure of it."

"Is that why Ali stops?"

"I don't know. I think he hears, too. Voices that he knows. Sometimes it's all quiet and they are not there. Then he will go on. But every Friday——"

"Yes, I've noticed that. Friday in particular."

"It was a settled thing. Sometimes they went out there during the week, but always Friday."

Being the woman she was quicker at deduction than the man. His thought followed hers.

"Doreen, can you distinguish any of the voices?"

"Only one woman. She was the leader of them. Just as Mrs. Bennett was in the Regiment. You remember? There's always somebody."

"You think it's the Settlement people? So do I."

"They've come back—to the place they made their own. It was a little, little world in the desert. They loved and hated and lived and died here."

"How can they *all* be dead!"

"I don't know. I haven't thought it out."

They were silent for a minute. Then he said, "I've got it—that empty space like a parade ground. It was their tennis court."

"Of course it was. And they danced—I've heard the music."

"So have I. First night we were here. I was worried by that cursed gramophone till midnight."

"But where did they dance? The office?"

"They couldn't move the desks. They're fixed." He got up suddenly, so suddenly that he knocked over his chair, and rushed to the shelves he had put up for her books. Cassim had brought them out, a few planks of seasoned wood. "This was some of the wood from their dancing floor," said Fyldes with conviction. "They floored the lower room under the office; but the natives stole the wood first thing. It only looks like a storehouse now."

They stared at each other as if they had lighted on the clue of a crime. The thing pieced in with frightful exactness. All Doreen's blood seemed to turn backwards in her veins, giving her an artificial courage.

"I must know more," she said. "It is horribly interesting. I shall listen now—at the rocks. I want to know if there were quarrels, jealousies, a special man to that woman——"

Her voice stopped as a clock stops if somebody checks the pendulum. The past rushed back on her and her eyes fell. But his voice encouraged her in its usual tone as if he had noticed nothing.

"If you listen you will not be able to hear. I never can."

Then he met the dumb gratitude of her eyes, and one obstacle was passed.

"I shan't try to listen, but I shall let myself," she declared. "I have always tried not to, up to now."

They stayed up later than usual, comparing their experiences, speculating as to the details of the lost community on which they had chanced. It was like a sudden stimulant after months of abstinence, so that they both felt heady with it. After they had gone to their separate rooms Fyldes heard a sudden call and a tap on his door. He opened it hastily to find his wife in a silk wrapper over her nightdress.

"Move my bed into your room," she said in an unsteady voice. "I can't stand the music—I never heard it so incessantly before."

He listened, but he could hear nothing. She hummed "Shepherd of the Hills" as if it were still in her ears, and he dragged the second camp bed from her room into his, hesitating a little before he found a place for it.

"Side by side," she said.

They had not slept so for a long time; but the unusual position did not disturb them. Slumber came as soon as they closed their eyes, and the dreamless night was morning, with Cassim moving about in the kitchen, before they had roused.

It was Fyldes' turn for a ride, during which Doreen used to walk as far as she could in another direction, scrambling amongst the camel thorn and the ridges of sand for exercise. To-day she did not go far. It was the old sites of the bungalows and the Settlement that drew her. She wandered about the office, the central space of the tennis courts, and thought she discovered a different ground plan that might have been a tiny mission room or chapel for religious service. Amongst forty or fifty white people there would be some sort of Sunday observance——

"Oh, I am mad—my imagination is running away with me," she said aloud. "This thing will obsess me. It is already getting on my nerves."

It was a Thursday. When Fyldes came back she looked at him expectantly, but he shook his head. "Nothing to-day," he said. "Of course not," she answered. "Not two days running. To-morrow is Friday." They were beginning to speak of their hallucination as if it were materialised, and they had evidence to go upon. She was later in returning from her ride the next day, and when he met her at the steps of the verandah she was trembling with excitement.

"I heard—I heard!" she said breathlessly. "Ali stood still for ever so long, and I looked at the sand and just waited, thinking of nothing. They came. Quite near us."

"Was it as usual?"

"Some special occasion, I think. I could hear *her* voice, directing. Rather staccato, high-pitched."

"Yes, I know. Always above the others. Go on——"

"I could hear the champagne corks going—you know what a silly feeling that gives you, that it's going to be fun and everybody in mad spirits——"

She saw her mistake too late, worse than the reference to the date wine. It seemed they stepped on eggshell.

He stood by the pony's side looking up at her with eyes that somehow reminded her of a slave's below the raised whip. Her own remained bright as if with the absorption of her experience.

"And—listen!—I *almost* heard a name! Yes, I got the sense of it, if not the form. Jack. I am nearly sure it was Jack. She called him, through the babble and the laughter and the talk. She wanted him to do something, ordered him."

"Ordered?"

"Oh, *she* would order anyone!"

"I see. Yes, I see."

Another barrier crossed. They were wonderful with each other. She could go on more freely now.

"And then I had to come home. I left them at it!" She could afford to laugh.

As he led the pony to the zereba, he pondered. This thing that was happening to them was not normal, yet in its results it had brought them back to normality. He wondered if it were safe, in the desert with its vastness and its influence, leading a life that induced a rapid mental development or decay? For the balance of humanity was lost, and the scales might be tipping this way or that without their knowledge.

He watched her and himself with growing disturbance. The hearing of voices no longer frightened them, or rather it frightened them so much that they sought it with a fury of inverted pleasure. It was their only resource. It was soon to become an obsession. They spoke now of Jack and of Mrs. Curtis. (They were almost sure the name was Curtis. His discovery this time.) It became a rivalry between them to hear her Christian name. Margaret—no, Margery. But Margery, they thought, was another woman. Maud. It was either Maud or May. The

M flickered in their ears persistently. They became intent, absorbed, good friends with each other through their ghostly associates, until he grew uneasy for the look in his wife's living eyes. This coquetting with the dead and its past was having its effect upon her.

The precariousness of their knowledge had hindered them so far from seeking more from Cassim; but a grizzly detail of the end to the story made it urgent. If these voices were all dead, where were they buried? Was there an unmarked cemetery in the sands, on which they had not chanced? Fyldes began to ask questions as one anxious about their own health.

"Not much sickness out here, I suppose, Cassim? It seems a healthy spot."

"No sickness, Sahib."

"In your village, for instance?"

"None, Sahib, save of want. While the Settlement was here we were better fed."

"Ah yes, the Settlement. They had no epidemics, had they—no fever?"

"Oh no. There was a doctor, but he had nothing to do!"

"Nobody died here while the wells were worked?"

"No one. When the wells were closed down they went away, all of them—those same that came went away."

Not dead? For a minute Fyldes and Doreen looked at each other with a shock worse than would have been had Cassim showed them many graves in the sand. "They went away——" she faltered. "But they have died since—you never hear of them?"

"Al Sitt is wrong. We have heard of them since, at the port, and even amongst ourselves. No one has died. They are scattered round the earth, gone to many lands. That is all. Why does Al Sitt think they are dead?"

His tone was so curious that it drove his hearers to caution. They had only made the inquiry out of consideration for themselves, said Fyldes. They had not been feeling very well, and wished to know if other Sahibs and their wives had stood the climate and its results. The native salaamed, reassuring them. But his furtive face, and the increased hurry with which he went homeward that night, were worse than confession.

"He knows! He has heard them also," said Doreen, almost violently. Then her eyes sought her husband's, and he noticed the strangeness of her expression.

"They are not dead, Dick," she said. "But their voices are here. They have left their impression in the air, so that the same life goes on being lived here over and over again, and can't end. If we ever get out of this, do you think our lives will go on being lived for some poor wretch to witness? Is it all just an infectious disease that we leave behind us . . . ?"

"Don't!" he said sharply. "I'm going to chuck it all, and take you back, out of it. If we can't forgive or trust each other——"

"Well, if we can't?" She gave a sudden laugh.

"It's better than going mad."

"If we are mad, then it is all a delusion, and what does it matter?"

"I shall chuck it and go," he answered. His face was grey.

"There was a quarrel to-day," she said in that eager, absorbed fashion that did not seem to hear him. "Maud and Jack. She accused him—with another woman."

"Margery?" In spite of himself he was interested, and he struggled with his interest.

"No, not Margery. A girl named Alice."

She had never spoken with such conviction. He burst

out, "You can't really hear!" angry because of a new dread.

"I can hear. She called him 'a ruddy hound'!"

"You've hypnotised yourself. You've invented it." But he could not think so.

"I couldn't invent—that. It's ugly, sordid; but it's been acted out, there by the rocks, and it's going on still."

That day he used the Marconi for the first time to send a wireless message to Port Omar. "Throwing up job at Al Gran oil-fields. Please send camels out."

The answer was unexpected. "Company have decided to abandon wells entirely. All buildings to be removed. Will arrange transport."

"So they've grasped it!" said Fyldes with a dreary laugh.

He looked at Doreen's face in the lamplight that night, and remembered that last year she had been a pretty girl. They had been three months at Al Gran. The desert had taken from her flesh and drawn the outline of her face sharper in little bones. Her mouth was pallid; but all the life in her body glittered in her eyes. When he told her that they were to leave and that the Company were finally abandoning the wells, she made no protest. Her only remark was to ask how soon.

"At once, I think," said Fyldes. "To-morrow, possibly. We had better set about dismantling this place."

Suddenly she rose from the table and came to him, clinging to him with thin arms like tentacles. The two faces pressed each other until the bruised flesh revolted, and he saw the red mark on her cheek as they drew apart. They had not kissed, their bodies were too close . . .

Cassim stood in undisturbed silence when he received the last orders to leave everything clean, and to repack the

bales. But his face twitched, and his eyes were those of a betrayed friend.

"No one will come here again, Sahib!" he said at last.

How did he know? The Company were abandoning the wells, and removing everything, bungalow and office, Fyldes told him.

"It is destiny," he said in the vernacular. "I go back to my village to bring last present."

"Poor devil!" said Fyldes to himself. A hurried thought of taking Cassim with them wandered through his mind. But where, and how? The future was as unexplored as the desert round about them, as barren as the sand. Only they two, they two, were real in a world of threatening shadows, to cling together and believe in reality because of the human warmth. The desert had swept them together and held them in a vice.

Later on, when he went to pack his personal belongings, he found his clothes folded, and laid ready on the camp bed, and a little bottle of colourless fluid. He drew the cork and smelt it. Date wine! The faint musty smell clung in his nostrils and made his throat dryer than the sands. It seemed to draw upwards to his lips, to flicker towards him. Colourless, subtle, faintly nauseous, alluring.

He took the bottle in his hand, and walking out into the verandah poured it into the sand. Then he broke the bottle on the step and flung it from him. It was as a libation. He turned to find his wife looking over his shoulder. She had heard the breaking glass. His lips were bloodless and his throat closed as he tried to swallow.

"Dicky!" she said, and the lost soul came back slowly, into her eyes, as from very far away. Then he knew what he had feared.

II

THE PASSION OF SUSAN TREMLETT

Susan Tremlett's cottage was the last in the village. So much so, indeed, that it might almost be said to be detached from the straggling street and to stand by itself on the high road to Wennborough. There were some who held that it had once been a toll-house, but if so the road must have been deflected, for the cottage now stood back within a narrow strip of garden. It had, more possibly, been a small farmhouse, for though the living-rooms were few the long dairy and ample outhouses were too cumbersome for a cottage. There was no land belonging to it now, save the narrow strip of garden in front and a piece of ground like an allotment at the back. All the pastures which might once have served for stock or hay had long since passed into the possession of a larger farm on the farther side of the high road, called the Manor Farm, and belonging to one John Vholes.

Susan found her cottage somewhat inconvenient, and her back premises a burden to keep clean in her exhaustive sense of the word. But she was too jealous of her privacy and independence to let them, though many men with carts and farm implements to house would have been glad to rent the barnlike structure beyond the dairy, and the dairy itself for storage. There was another reason for retaining them, moreover, which lay deeper than her obstinate grip upon her own belongings, but which she admitted to herself alone.

Susan had inherited her property from a great-aunt, to nurse whom she had come down from the North and

made her home in Somerset for the last six months of the old lady's life. Mrs. Weston had been a Tremlett too, and had "kept herself to herself" very much as Susan did. In fact there had been much of kinship and likeness in the two spare, reticent women, though they had hardly known each other before Susan's advent in Redincote. The neighbours in the village street below had not liked Mrs. Weston; she never gossiped about her own affairs or other people's save for a sharp comment if they were thrust upon her notice, and she was inhospitable—no one was ever invited to have a cup of tea with her, or a bit of dinner, nor did she go to other cottages. Little was known of her past or her present, and when Susan Tremlett arrived to nurse her the neighbours had hardly heard that she was ill. The same tradition seemed to colour Susan's personality, and when Mrs. Weston died the cottage became no more accessible or sociable.

Susan Tremlett was a woman of five and thirty when she came South, but she looked more, as women of the working classes often do who have lived a life with little relaxation to soften it. She had nursed her father through a painful illness, and had "looked after" her weaker-natured mother for the remaining years of her life, before she took up the same duties for Mrs. Weston. The Tremletts were not only self-respecting but intensely respectable. They had a little money, and the value of capital is nowhere so high as amongst the working classes. It was not enough to support Susan and her ailing mother without very strict living and unconscious self-denial on the daughter's part, but it carried Mrs. Tremlett respectably to her grave, and when Mrs. Weston died in her turn and left the old cottage to her great-niece Susan could still support herself with hard labour and the economy she had learned all her life. In appearance she was so straight

and flat as to be angular, almost without curves to her limbs, a promising body on which to hang modern dress had she taken advantage of it. But her straight gowns, though scanty, were never much above the ankle, and had an out-of-date fashion in a waist line, owing to service of many years' standing. She was so fair as to be nearly colourless, her smooth shining hair uncut and closely rolled against her head, her capable face lit by quick blue eyes with linty lashes. She had little beauty, but in her secret mind she found her own intense cleanliness and neatness more admirable than the high-coloured, tousle-headed village girls whose figures were unconfined rather than slender.

Susan did not look a woman to be the victim of a grand passion. Why this experience had overtaken her so late in her life is one of those problems which tax the science of Psychology; for it was neither the outcome of her womanhood (which might naturally have been seeking for some masculine attraction for many barren years), nor the lukewarm feeling which grows from vanity and opportunity. Susan's passion was a devouring flame which would slowly consume her body and warp her mind if it were allowed full sway. Her strong will kept it secret, but not in check, for the trembling delight of it was a temptation she did not resist. It had enveloped her like a pillar of fire, and warmed her frozen senses to new and wonderful experience, so that she felt at times a beauty of the world that she had never noticed before, though she suffered from an equal reaction in moods of temper and despair. It was to her as if her eyes had been suddenly opened, so that she knew she had been blind, on the day when she made that mistake in fetching the milk from the farm opposite and went to the front door instead of to the side entrance—a very natural one to her proud spirit, which marched up to front doors without any diffidence of social position.

There, in the porch, stood John Vholes the farmer, and on learning her errand he asked her with off-hand civility to go round to the dairy, pointing with his pipe in the right direction.

Susan had never had much opinion of men, possibly because they had shown small inclination towards her even as a girl. She was as strong as many young men are, herself, though she did not look it, and far less lazy. John Vholes had hardly looked at her, save to direct her, and had but a vague idea of her as Mrs. Weston's niece who had come to take charge of the bed-ridden old lady. But from that moment the picture of him smoking in the porch was always with Susan Tremlett, haunting her awakened heart and showing her romance for the first time.

For others, perhaps, he was not an object of romance, this square-shouldered ruddy farmer in his provincial clothes and leather gaiters. It was on a Sunday morning that Susan saw him smoking in his porch, or he would never have been there, and Sunday morning became a coloured time in the drab week for her ever afterwards. John Vholes went to church in the evening, if he went at all, and spent the morning at leisure, after the early milking. It is remarkable what intimate knowledge a woman can gain of a man's habits and daily life, without obvious inquiry, if she is interested in him, particularly if she has the advantage of living nearly opposite. Partly by her constant watch upon him, and partly by deduction, Susan grew to know what Vholes was doing, or would be doing, at any hour of the day, and could plan her own life so that she could see him, if not meet him outright, and follow his pursuits to the better knowledge of his character. She did not idealise him, but she was indulgent to his faults as she had never been to any other living creature. If he were not a constant churchgoer—well, a man who is up at six every day and working up to sunset, has a right

to a day of rest. If he were said to be "market merry" when he came back from the town of Wennborough on a Thursday, he was only a dashing fellow, and popular with others of his kind. She cloaked him with manliness, and saw him as a gallant figure in his robust follies.

Mrs. Weston had always had her milk and butter from Vholes, and Susan had the excuse during her great-aunt's illness of fetching it herself to save trouble. After Mrs. Weston's death she continued to deal with the farm on her own account, and her sharp eyes were never so observant as when she walked across the road and in at the side gate to the dairy. She never made the mistake again of stalking up to the front door through the prim garden of old-fashioned flowers, but she saw as much of the house as if she had been the vicar's wife and invited into the parlour to accept the farmer's hospitality. John Vholes was a bachelor, and seemed capable of taking care of himself even amongst the pretty girls of the district. His kitchen was ruled over by an old woman who had been his housekeeper for so long that even gossip never linked their names. She was a pleasant, bustling woman, with a civil word even for Mrs. Weston and her equally reserved niece, and as she filled Susan's can for her from the great pans she would let a word drop that was as music to hungry ears, little though she knew it.

"Master's away to the big lunch at Wennborough to-day. Two hundred farmers sitting down in the big ball-room at the Crown! It's a sight to see, they say. Calls it lunch, too, with beef and mutton and ham enough to feed an army! *I* call it dinner, don't you, Miss Tremlett?"

"Some people don't take to a heavy meal midday," said Susan cunningly. "Specially if they are working all afternoon like the farmers. I suppose Mr. Vholes has his meal at seven o'clock, like the gentry?"

"He'll eat at midday and at evening, too," said Mrs. Proudfoot laughing. "A good man for his meals is Master John—— Did you say butter, too, Miss Tremlett?"

"Half a pound, if you please. You have the best butter I've seen in Somerset."

"Ah, that's because Mr. Vholes keeps Jerseys, and won't have the broken-coat cattle or the Frisians. Most farmers round about don't like the Jerseys because they cost more to feed and house, and the broken-coats lies out all weathers. Mr. Vholes don't fear to spend a bit to earn a bit, and our stock's better than any round here, yes, and our milk and butter's better too, as you verily say, Miss Tremlett!"

The old dame was pleased, and Susan was the richer by a piece of information. John Vholes would spend money on his stock to get a better price for his produce, and though her North Country upbringing demurred a little at the outlay she gloried in his wider-minded policy and bold enterprise.

There came a wet morning when Susan carried her can over to the farm to find the dairy upset by a loose tile on the roof that had let in a pretty runlet of rainwater and spoilt two bowls of cream. Everything had been shifted to the further side, and Mrs. Proudfoot, with her skirts hitched up, was sweeping out the wet with a broom.

"Would you mind just stepping into the passage and waiting there till I can fill your can?" said the worried woman, and Susan, with her secretive face, unmoved begged her not to hurry—she could wait until the mess was "ridded up." But though her face did not betray her, her heart might have done it by its eager thumping as she passed beyond the dairy into the back passage of the house. It was a moment of intense excitement, for the passage led into the hall by a door which happened

to be open, and Susan could see the familiar surroundings of John Vholes' daily life as she had never done before.

The hall was as square as a room, and might have been used as such if John had been modern enough to conform with fashion. As it was he had merely furnished it for his own convenience with a broad table on which was a collection of sticks and caps and a pair of riding leathers thrown down in a hurry. There were two old-fashioned arm-chairs, each side of the hearth (for the hall had a fireplace), and a strongly coloured rug on the floor. Susan's eyes noted every detail as she stood primly waiting for her milk, and a glimpse also of the dining-room beyond with its modern oak sideboard and suite of chairs to match. She did not see that the red chenille of the table-cloth and curtains was in bad taste and inharmonious with the substantial old farm-house; to her they were the acme of comfort and rather extravagant, and raised John Vholes still higher in the realm of Romance. From that day she could imagine his doings inside the house as well as outside—coming into the hall and throwing his whip or hat on the table, and sitting down beside the hearth to take off his muddy boots, perhaps, before he went in to the glories of his dining-room. She had noticed what could be seen of the dining-room carpet. It was imitation Indian, too light for the room, and splashed with blue and pink on a pale ground. He could not walk on that carpet with boots that had been amongst the turnips.

Susan did not look like a day-dreamer, and if anyone had suggested such a thing to her she would have scoffed at it. But she had two favourite day-dreams, none the less. In one of these some miraculous chance brought John Vholes across the road to ask a favour of her. It generally took the form of wishing to use her outhouses for his carts, for even Susan's day-dreams had the genius

of remote possibility. It was for this far-off hope that she would not let her back premises to those who really wanted them, though Vholes had ample cart sheds of his own and was never likely to. Nevertheless, she saw him in fancy in the deep porch that was far more ancient and curious than his own, and imagined her dignified greeting—"Will you step in, Mr. Vholes?" He stepped in, and his broad, unusual figure in the big "living-room" of the cottage was as real to Susan as if she actually had him there. Her room would have delighted a lover of the picturesque far more than any at the Manor Farm, but to Susan it was merely homely and old-fashioned. The walls were whitewashed, and the great fireplace had an ingle-nook with seats each side and an overhanging chimney-piece that was black with smoke from open fires. The beams crossing the ceiling were black also, and the window was wide and low with latticed panes set in lead, and a broad seat. There were deep cupboards in the walls, and the walls themselves were three feet in thickness, which made the room delightfully warm in winter and cool in summer. But the only chair in which Susan could beg her visitor to be seated was the wheel-back arm-chair with the patchwork cushions in which Mrs. Weston had sat for so many years, and the only hospitality she could offer him was tea out of the old brown teapot and hot scones of her own baking. It was the delight of fancying him in her own house that made the bare room a different place, for she was like all other women, despite her repellent appearance.

The other day-dream was better staged. She liked to fancy that they met in the town of Wennborough on market day, and that he asked her to take tea with him at the Crown. Susan had once had to go to the hotel to buy a bottle of port wine for her great-aunt in her last

illness. It was a dark, irregular old inn, with steps up and down as traps for unwary feet, and a warming smell of lemons and alcohol and smoke. She knew that Vholes put up his horse here on market days, and that it was much frequented by all the farmers in the neighbourhood as well as motorists and the business men of Wennborough. But she had caught a glimpse of the coffee-room—just as she had caught a glimpse of Vholes' own house—and some strangers who were touring were having tea there. The small tables with their cosy air of privacy—for the Crown had been modernised as to furnishing—the coloured tea-sets, the good fire, so pleasant in the early spring, had taken hold of Susan's torpid imagination. From that day she had a background for meeting Vholes away from home as well as in her own cottage.

Susan had made more acquaintances in the town than in the village, and one friend. The bigger tradespeople in Wennborough recognised her as a personality despite her unprepossessing appearance, and respected her as the possessor of old Mrs. Weston's property, tiny though it was. Susan Tremlett held her head up and forced her world to respect her, but she was too grim to enter social circles or to advance beyond recognition and civility behind counters and in the street. Her lonely friendship came about in another way and through mutual tastes. Susan was a great novel reader, and of the better-class novel that may be called "classical" rather than the type of detective story or the sensational romance. She was intelligent and critical, and quite conscious of her superiority to most of her neighbours in the village. Her favourite authors were Arnold Bennett and Sheila Kaye-Smith, but she admired *Riceyman Steps* more than *Tamarisk Town*. On the whole she preferred men writers to women, but she had read Miss Kennedy and Rebecca West, and found

The Return of the Soldier intensely human, though she could not have told why.

The principal bookshop in Wennborough was in the market square, nearly opposite to the Crown. It was called Crystal's. Susan was always drawn to the Crown because she knew that John Vholes would surely be there at some time during the day, and her need of books made her visit Crystal's weekly, with a sharp glance across the square at her entrance to and exit from the bookshop. The girl in charge of the lending library at Crystal's was sympathetic and ready to offer advice on the choosing of books, or to "get anything down" for subscribers. Susan Tremlett dropped into conversation with her through an inquiry for *The Village Doctor*. "Is it good? Have you read it?" "Not so good as *Joanna Godden*, I think. But all she writes is good." "I will take it, anyway. Oh, put aside *Elsie and the Child* for me, will you?" "Let's see—short stories, are they not?" Susan's face fell. "I hope not. I thought it was a sequel to *Riceyman Steps*." "So it is—but it is not a complete novel." The girl was called away to other subscribers, but she returned to find Susan lingering by the last new books sent down from *The Times* book-club.

"I don't know this man," she said, turning the pages of an uncut copy.

"He's said to be like Conrad. You've read Conrad?"

"No—I've missed him."

"Oh!!! you *must*."

Susan read a page of the book in her hand. "Too foreign for me," she said, laying it down. "I like something I can recognise and say 'That's true.' Anyone could queer me with palm-trees and ships and jungles. I shouldn't know if it were true, and it all gets mixed up in my head like jazz."

"Conrad doesn't do that. He just makes a picture. I don't think this is really like him—" she took the rejected volume from Susan's hand. "But you'll come to it later."

The book was *Galleon's Reach*.

Susan took home *The Village Doctor* and revelled in it. She found out that the name of the young lady in Crystal's was Miss Smee. They were always Young Ladies in Crystal's. When Susan brought back a book she unconsciously lingered to get a few words about it to Miss Smee, who somehow managed to read everything. If they could not speak, owing to a press of customers, they nodded. The friendship never went beyond the shop, but amongst the bookshelves it became almost intimate.

From the time that John Vholes appeared in Susan's life her taste in literature altered a little and became more subtle. She "discovered" W. B. Maxwell and read him for the sake of the glamour he cast over common things. A writer who could make *Hill Rise* romantic appealed to her quickening senses, and she felt the greater atmosphere of his stories to those of more laborious men. In this mood she would have found even Barrie comprehensible; but no one had ever suggested her reading his books because they were so well known that her ignorance of them would have seemed impossible. She had never read Kipling for the same reason. But if she had he would have frightened her.

One market day in July she started to walk to Wennborough across the fields. By this she could save a mile, and enter the town by the station, coming by way of side-streets to her goal, the market-place. There was a motor bus that linked up Wennborough with Redincote and other villages, and Susan usually returned by it when her market basket was heavy; but she disliked the bus packed with neighbours in the morning, the delays on the road owing to

cattle being driven in to market, and the arriving, hot and squeezed, in the middle of the town. She had not really the right to walk across the fields which had once belonged to her property, for they were now John Vholes'; but a tradition had lingered with her great-aunt that there was a right of way and Susan profited by it. John Vholes sometimes rode by the same route to Wennborough in preference to the dusty crowded road, and Susan had once had the opportunity of opening a gate for him, for which he touched his hat to her without in reality recognising her. He had an eye for a comely face or a bit of colour, but Susan's cleanly cut outline and lack of feminine superfluities had never caught it.

Of late Vholes had bought a small car which he was learning to drive with less success than his horses. Susan hated that Morris Cowley, and found that Mrs. Proudfoot shared her antipathy to it. "When the Master be a shooting in an out tu garage, and scraping t' gateway, my heart be goin' faster than the dang thing!" said the housekeeper, gasping with her hurried speech. "Farmers du be better a horseback. They knows it natural like from the first breeches!"

Susan also felt that Vholes was more suitable on horseback, and more suited. He sat his substantial cob with ease, if not grace, and to her glamoured eyes he was again the dashing fellow in his long boots and breeches and short coat. She had hoped to see him cantering across the fields on this July morning, but either she was too early or too late, for her solitary walk was disturbed by no horseman, though she knew that he was not using the car. Mrs. Proudfoot had told her with relief that it was "in the vet's hands" for some blunder on John's part in driving.

The morning was very hot and somewhat misty. The valley of the Wenn was rich in water meadows where the

broken-coat cattle stood out as clearly as in some Dutch picture, and the field walk was level all the way into Wennborough. Susan found the weather very trying, and for once her wiry body flagged behind her stronger mind, so that she walked rather slowly and did not reach the town before eleven o'clock. The sun had drawn the dews from the grass lands by that time, and was shining flatly on the tortuous streets and crowded houses of the Borough, but without the sharp edges to light and shade of the earlier year. There was a faint lacy clouding to the sky that promised more heat, and no wind to drive it away.

Susan came into the town by the railway, and passing the station walked along the road where the best private residences were. They were broad substantial houses in flowerful gardens, old enough to be mellowed into picturesqueness and at this time of the year a mass of colour and scent from roses and lilies and blossoming creepers. The air was rich with odour and sun, and the tired woman found it a little oppressive as she plodded steadily on towards the centre of the town. She had to pass through the smaller side-streets to reach the market square, and in one of them her observant eyes noted a shop that was "selling off" on the other side of the way. Susan crossed the street and looked in the window; there was only one, for it was the class of shop that limits itself to so-called model hats and gowns, and only puts a sample in the frontage. This shop was no more in reality than a cottage with one bow window adapted to the sale of select goods, and trading under the name of "Doris." But the goods had been too select for Wennborough, which was used to buying clothes at the big drapers' in the market square, and "Doris" was giving up business and selling the limited stock at a dingy reduction. The style of the wearing apparel was not in Susan Tremlett's line, and she would have scoffed at the

few samples in the window as ridiculous in her ordinary mood; but a summer gown in a glowing heap inside the narrow pane of glass caught her eye and appealed to the absorbing interest of her life. Even she could see that the shades of cherry-colour and *sang-de-bœuf* were attractive, or might be attractive to John Vholes in his riding gaiters, so easily was he caught by the eye, but never by Susan in her washed-out prints. What she could not see was that the red gown would make her more bleached in appearance than ever, and that its scanty softness was totally unsuited to her uncompromising angles. She stalked into the little shop and asked to look at the gown nearer with no sense of her inappropriateness, and even the dubious glance of the worn woman who took it out of the window did not daunt her.

The gown on nearer inspection proved to be of a crêpe material, and even richer in colour than it had seemed through the glass. Susan fingered it with secret hunger. It fulfilled that longing in her for the utterly impracticable that lurks in all women. It was marked twenty-five shillings—a dreadful price for such a useless article of dress—and it chanced that she had the money with her, which she had been meaning to pay into her post-office savings book.

"It is really a bargain, madam—a little French model. It was three guineas." The unlucky proprietress of "Doris" sighed, but she could not risk losing a possible customer by suggesting a more suitable purchase to Susan Tremlett.

"I'll take it. The weather's hot enough," said Susan, her reference to the July day being an excuse to her own conscience rather than the saleswoman.

She paid for the red gown, and saw it deftly folded into so small a parcel that it slipped into her market bag without betraying her. The reckless sense of guilt had an unknown pleasure in it, and she completed her folly by buying the

red stockings that the saleswoman said " went with " the gown. It is true they only cost two shillings in the sale, but they were absolutely unserviceable for Susan's hard wear.

The market was just beginning when she reached the square, that side of it which was penned off for the live stock being loud with the unhappy cries of animals. Susan was not imaginative, but it gave her a sense of discomfort to hear them that she would not have experienced for a crying child. She glanced by habit at the broad entrance to the Crown across the way, and her heart fluttered under her flat breast to see a thickset man dismounting from a thickset cob which he handed over to the ostler who touched his hat—sure sign that Mr. Vholes was a man of some standing in Wennborough. The world always swam a little with Susan when she saw Vholes suddenly, and she lost momentary control of her senses. But her eyes followed him as he stepped into the market square, and snapped with anger when he raised his hat to two young women crossing the square. They were townspeople and their short sleeves and short skirts made Susan furious, despite the red dress in her own market bag. To her unreasoning fear such display of limbs was all on account of John Vholes, standing square-legged amongst the pig pens, and not for fashion or general admiration. John, in his well-worn riding breeches and hard hat, was not so likely to appeal to girls who lived in Wennborough as the clerks at the bank and the lawyer's office with their morning suits and pale faces. But Susan did not see it. She was blinded by the glare of her own passion.

She tore her eyes from John and walked stiffly across the market square to Crystal's to change her book as usual. Miss Smee was not engaged at the moment, and Susan handed in the returned volume with a brightening of face that was her equivalent for a smile.

"I liked that tale you gave me, Miss Smee. It is seldom one gets a novel all about Australia, and it was interesting. I don't feel that it's so foreign as other places. *Janet Greer* was interesting too, though she made a mess of things. I couldn't help seeing how it might all have worked out with another ending if she'd acted different. That shows you how I liked the story."

"Well, *I* liked it," said Miss Smee with some elation in her manner. "But then I'm going there, and so I was interested in every word."

"Going there!"

"Yes, no one knows yet—I haven't said a word, except of course to give in my notice to Crystal's. I'm going to sail for Adelaide next week. It's all been arranged so quickly I've hardly had time to breathe."

"D'you mean you're taking a post out there?" gasped Susan.

"I am, indeed. I've got a brother married in Adelaide, and he's been at me for months to go out, but I couldn't make up my mind. So he looked about and got me the offer of a librarian's job if I'd go, and I had to decide all of a hurry. But I'm going, and now it's settled I'm very glad."

Susan felt as she might have done if she had gone to clasp a friend's hand and received a blow with it instead. Despite her reserved manner she looked upon Miss Smee as a great friend of hers, the only real friend she had in the neighbourhood, and she had supposed that Miss Smee looked upon her in the same way. The librarian was the only person in whom she had even thought of confiding her lonely love-affair, and her need for such self-revelation was as great as other women's. She wanted to talk of John and each trifling incident of their acquaintance to buoy herself with hope, and the tragic silence imposed upon

her by her own reserve was eating into her heart as much as her passion for the man. Some day she had thought she would lay her hand on Miss Smee's arm and say, "My dear, I never told you—I love John Vholes, and it is killing me," and Miss Smee would be transformed into the perfect confidante who understood by implication.

And now Miss Smee was going, without the confidence and the relief it would have given even to a secretive nature like Susan's. She tried to say something of what she was feeling, but all that came to her was, "Well, I hope you'll like it. I shall miss you in the library. Good-bye," and other customers coming in she found herself in the street, without the book she had come for, too disheartened to go back for it. She always lunched at the old-fashioned pastrycook's which was also a restaurant, and as a rule allowed herself the good, solid eighteenpenny meal of three courses, for she believed in food and her digestion had never been petted. Soup, hot roast, and veg., with pudding to follow, were a good foundation in Susan's mind for the hot hours of marketing and the hotter ride home.

But to-day she felt singularly disinclined for the solid meal, which to most people would have been impossible in the stifling July day under any circumstances. Susan put it down to the disturbance caused in her life by Miss Smee's defection, but she did not feel so well as usual, which simply meant that as a rule she never thought about her body at all, and to-day it was forcing itself upon her attention. She found a piece of cake and a glass of milk as much as she wanted to eat and drink, but when she went into the market square again to finish her shopping she still felt tired and depressed. It did not occur to her that the strain of the last few months and her unusual emotional stress must have some reaction upon her physically as well as mentally ; all she thought was that she "felt kind of

curious," and was at least saved the fear of illness which might have haunted a more nervous woman.

Susan's marketing took her longer than suited her straightforward nature because she had a rooted suspicion that all South-Country people tried to cheat her, partly from a civility she was unused to in the North. Her sharp eyes detected a light weight in the bacon, and she went to three shops before she was convinced that tea really had gone up a halfpenny a pound. She condemned Cheddar cheese and upheld her native Cheshire until the salesman was exasperated, but all the while that "curious feeling" was making it an effort to her to exact the most for her money as she did by habit. Her limbs felt heavy and rebelled against her will, and when at last she stood at the corner of the High Street waiting for the bus for Redincote she felt thankful that she had not to walk those miles across the water meadows to get home.

"It's the weather," she said to herself with matter-of-fact reasoning. "This climate down west is too relaxing. 'Tis like a vapour bath." She stared with jaded eyes into the square, and saw John Vholes again with his female acquaintance of the morning. They came out of the doorway of the hotel as if they had been having an early tea together, and the former touched his hat as he turned into the inn yard. For the minute the old flame of jealousy sprang up in Susan and burnt her into vitality; but it was like the flare of a candle that gutters out. It died down so quickly that it dismayed her more than her unnatural fatigue.

"I don't seem to care about anything to-day," she thought forlornly. "Maybe it was Miss Smee going put me wrong from the first. I'll be glad to get home."

As a rule she was reluctant to leave the town as long as John Vholes was in it, and the outing did her good. But to-day she climbed wearily into the bus and took her seat

with relief, not casting a glance back at the Crown to see if the cob was coming out of the yard with John in the saddle. A neighbour from one of the cottages in Redincote got into the bus and sat down next to her, looking rather hard at her sad face.

"Why, Miss Tremlett, you do look done. Aren't you feeling too well?" she asked good-naturedly. She might easily have met with a rebuff for her inquiry, but for once Susan was neither short with her nor reserved.

"I am feeling tired," she admitted. "I walked in across the fields, and it was hot. I think the weather's trying even for July—so heavy and airless."

"P'raps it's the place don't suit you after bein' in the North," said Mrs. Harris sympathetically. "It's bound to lie low, being in the valley of the river. You're looking real done up." She thought, but would not say so, that Susan Tremlett's face was ghastly. All the blood seemed to have left it save for two red patches under the eyes, and her skin was livid. The eyes too were dull and listless, and unlike Susan's in expression. But something of her indomitable spirit seemed to pull the sagging body together, and she spoke with characteristic decision.

"I know the place doesn't suit me. I'm thinking of making a change—a real change."

"You'll be going back North?" said Mrs. Harris with the curiosity of her class. She wondered if the cottage would be let or sold, and if she might not get pleasanter, more gossipy neighbours.

"Further than that. I'm thinking of going overseas to Australia," said Susan.

Mrs. Harris gasped. She had heard practically nothing of Susan's connections, beyond the fact that they were North-Country, and for all she knew there might be a colony of them settled in Australia and anxious for Susan to join

them. She said, "That'll be a big change for you, Miss Tremlett. Mr. Hart's daughter married a Canadian soldier in the War, and went to Canada. But she doesn't like it—says she's longing to come home."

"*I* shan't want to come home!" said Susan grimly. "Once I get there I lay I'll stop. But it's not settled yet," she added more cautiously.

Mrs. Harris was, of course, convinced that it was settled, and told everyone she knew that Susan Tremlett was going to Australy for certain and never meant to come back. The other cottagers speculated more as to who would have her cottage than as to Susan's departure; but they never questioned that Susan was going.

Susan herself knew that she had never dreamt of doing such a thing before she got into the bus, and had no reason for saying it except a reckless impulse. She did not even know what made her say it, except that Miss Smee's emigration was in her mind and the book she had been reading about *Janet Greer*. But she vaguely liked the sensation she had caused, and the importance to which it had raised her, and did not intend to deny it. After all, she had not said anything definite, only that she was *thinking* of going to Australia, without any settled date for her departure. Well, she was thinking of it, for it had taken hold of what little imagination she possessed. It would be so strange and so different from anything she knew that she might even recover in some sort from her passion for John Vholes. She would never forget him, but she might not suffer as she did seeing him day by day.

She went into her own cottage with dragging feet, but before she made her tea she must take her can and go over to the farm for milk. She went hopelessly, without her usual anticipation, and Vholes' housekeeper noticed her drawn face as Mrs. Harris had done.

"You do look tired, Miss Tremlett! I knew it would be hot in market to-day. Queer weather I call it, enough to make anyone feel ill. Come in and sit down a minute."

But Susan did not want to sit down, even at the Manor Farm, though she would have caught at the opportunity ordinarily. She had an insistent feeling that she must get back to her own cottage quickly for fear of she knew not what. Something was going to happen to her—was happening already—and like some sick animal she wanted the seclusion she knew, safe from prying eyes. But while Mrs. Proudfoot filled the can she repeated her vague statement to Mrs. Harris with a last instinct of reaching Vholes' ears and making herself of some importance to him even for a moment. To go to Australia seemed a big thing that could hardly fail to startle him to passing interest. It startled his housekeeper, at any rate. She would fain have detained Susan to talk it over, and to hear some details, but Susan would not be detained. "Nothing's settled yet, but I think I shall go," she said as she paid for the milk. "And if I do I'll just skip off and no one know anything about it till it's done." That would keep them all on tenterhooks and prolong the interest in her.

"Well, *I* shall be sorry, you've been such a quiet neighbour and so pleasant," said Mrs. Proudfoot, much as Susan had said it to Miss Smee only with more kindliness. She watched the angular figure cross the road and noticed that it was not so upright and wiry as usual, with real concern. She was amongst the few people who had really liked Susan, partly no doubt because Susan had unbent in her eagerness to talk of Vholes.

"Looks as if she'd gone to pieces somehow, poor soul," was her comment. "Dear! dear! and to think of her going all that way across the seas!"

She managed to include the little piece of local news with

her master's supper that evening, everybody going away from Redincote being an event to Mrs. Proudfoot's simple mind, and Australia somewhere "off the map" in her imagination. Her schooldays were very far behind her, and dated from a time when geography made little impression on the infant mind. The War had taught her something, and brought France and Belgium out of the mists into real countries because she had had nephews and grandsons in the trenches; but the Australian troops had not come to Wennborough, and she still thought of the Commonwealth as much the same thing as America.

Master John was not exactly market merry, but he had had enough to make him inclined to joke.

"Miss Tremlett's going out to find the husband she's missed in England!" he said with a broad laugh on his good-humoured face. "There's a chance out there even for a woman of her figure!"

"For shame, Master John!" exclaimed the housekeeper indignantly. "A husband, you says! If you'd seen the poor thing this evening you'd have said it was a doctor or an undertaker she'd be looking for over there."

The "poor thing" deserved the housekeeper's pity, though she had passed the stage of pitying herself. She did not know what was the matter with her, but that "curious feeling" had crept up from her leaden feet all over her body until it reached her brain and made rest an imperative necessity. She did not make herself the cup of tea for which she had longed an hour ago (she always wondered afterwards what would have happened if she had and if things would have gone differently with her), but she did a thing she had never done before; she lay down on the hard horsehair sofa where old Mrs. Weston had spent some of the last days of her life when she could no longer sit up, and for once gave way to her bodily needs. Even

her hands felt heavy as she raised them, and seemed to her a little swollen.

"I feel curious right over," she muttered to herself. "Just as if it wasn't me."

When she woke the light was growing dim, but the summer night had not yet robed the earth in darkness. Susan raised her head and stared round her as if she saw the room for the first time, wondering where she was. But by degrees she felt better for the rest, and able to get up and go upstairs to bed. Her body still felt heavier than its wont, but her brain was clearing. She could collect herself to speculate as to whether the strange phase had been a "touch of sun" through walking to the town, or if she had eaten something that disagreed with her. She did not believe in medicines, but if this heaviness continued she must get something from the chemist in Wennborough. Her hands still troubled her, they felt so much softer and clumsier than her own, and when she looked at them she was startled to see that they did not seem like her own hands either.

There was an old-fashioned mirror hanging on the wall, more for ornament than use since neither Mrs. Weston nor her niece ever looked at her reflection in it. It was a round mirror in an ebony frame, one of the few things of any antique value that Mrs. Weston had possessed; but Susan did not know this, she merely included it amongst the familiar surroundings of the room, and would stiffly have refused an offer to buy it if anyone had seen and coveted it. With some vague notion of seeing whether she looked ill she crossed the room now and looked at herself in the mirror. The dusk was not sufficient to make it useless, for it hung near the window, but for a minute she thought that her sight was failing her and went closer to be sure. Then she uttered a hoarse cry of mingled fear

and horror, and staggered back, shutting out the reflection with her raised hands.

The face that she saw in the glass was that of a totally different woman.

She sat, fell down rather, on the sofa again, afraid that she was going off her head or that she was not yet awake. She would not go back to the mirror in case the delusion should continue, but bracing her nerveless limbs she went slowly upstairs to her bedroom, pulling herself up by the rope banister, for the stairs, like those in many old houses, went up between the walls of the rooms and were almost as steep as a ladder. When she got into her bedroom she undressed without going near the meagre dressing-table to avoid a second reflection, and got straight into bed, forcing herself to lie still and not to be so frightened that the bed shook under her. After a time her will power had its effect, and she fell asleep again, heavily, as if exhausted.

She woke rather later than her usual hour with an impression on her mind of having had a terrible nightmare. At first she could not remember what it was, but as the details of the day before came back to her they culminated in that strange face in the glass instead of her own, and she gasped a little with a return of her terror. She had never been one to see ghosts, or to believe in them, and she could only put it down to that "touch of sun" which she thought must have been the cause of it all. Then she raised her hands and looked at them. They were not her hands any more than they had been last night. They were blunter-fingered and less strong, though they were really broader and larger than her own—clumsy she had named them last night, and clumsy in comparison with her own they were. They would never accomplish the amount of hard work that Susan exacted from all the

component parts of her body. They were the hands of a "slacker," the sort of hands that she looked upon with a snort of contempt.

Very deliberately she forced herself to rise and go to the dressing-table. A woman with a weaker personality would have put it off, or would have gone into hysterics of fear; but Susan did not falter, though her heart pounded against her ribs like some engine driven beyond its capacity. The little cheap looking-glass was in the full light of day, and could not deceive her as the mirror in the dusk last night might have done. She looked into it and saw the same face of a stranger.

Then for some minutes Susan really collapsed. This thing was beyond all reason and all common experience. She was afraid to think of it or to find a solution lest her brain should give way. She sat huddled up on the floor in her nightdress, and now she noticed that her feet had changed as much as her hands, though in this case they were smaller than her own, the toes pinched together as if with pointed shoes such as she had never worn. She knew now that the whole of her body had changed and not only her face. She was Susan Tremlett in another woman's body, but whose, or what it was that had happened to her, she could not even guess.

After a while she heard a knocking on the door of the cottage, but she crawled closer to the bed and hid her strange face against the bedclothes. It was only the boy who brought her loaf each morning, and even while she trembled she remembered with relief that if she were busy in the back garden, as often happened at this early hour, she had sharply told him to leave the loaf in the porch and she would take it in later. After a few minutes she heard his step going through the narrow front garden and the clang of the gate, and she breathed more freely.

As the hours went on and she was unmolested her courage—the courage of Susan Tremlett—revived in the body that belonged to a less heroic woman. She began to think, to plan, driven by her extreme necessity. She had half recognised, even in her first panic, that the disappearance of her former outward personality would be attributed to her present one, and that her possession of all that was recognised as Susan's would be an ominous witness against her. She might well be accused of the murder of her own self, and had no means of disproving it. Even her voice had changed, and when she spoke she disliked the tone though the words were hers. It was a more attractive voice than her own, judged by ordinary standards, just as the other woman's appearance was more attractive, but she hated it none the less. If she showed herself to her neighbours and narrated what had happened to her, she saw more clearly every hour that they would first think her mad, and then suspect her of being a criminal. She was helpless unless she could convince them that she had a right to take Susan's place as a totally different woman.

She studied that new face and figure in the glass with characteristic enterprise, partly to accustom herself to it and partly to see what could be made of it. The woman whose body had been so oddly transferred to her was, she judged, a little older than herself, but looked younger on account of some care and attention to her person that Susan had never taken beyond a neatness and cleanliness she did not find now in the looking-glass. Her disapproving scrutiny saw a full face with a heavier jaw than her own, but less decision in the lips, which were rather full, a low forehead, the dark hair growing prettily round it, brown eyes with lids that drooped a little at the corners, blunter features than her own, a touch of colour in the

cheeks that might grow coarser with heat or appetite. The woman's face was not one she would have approved or even trusted had she met her in ordinary circumstances, and the body matched it in character—a full breast and hips well moulded, substantial limbs, not fat at present, but with a tendency to indulgence and loose muscles.

Susan called the new self in the glass Janet Greer, from the Australian novel she had last read, and whose heroine was of the same type to her mind. She could think of no other name on the spur of the moment, and it was not likely to be recognised in Redincote. It did as well as any other, and had no connection with the neighbourhood. The only person who knew it was Miss Smee, and she was leaving Wennborough within the next week. Susan's brain in Janet Greer's body began to plan out a credible account of herself and how she came to be in the cottage, taking the essential facts first with the genius of a master mind. She could fill in the details presently, but the main points of the story must be decided at once.

Her first precaution was against anyone catching sight of her for the next few days, in which her mode of life helped her as it would not have done a more sociable woman. She sometimes passed a week without speaking to any of her neighbours except Mrs. Proudfoot when she went for the milk, and they had little encouragement to intrude upon her. The only danger was that the kindly housekeeper might come over to see why she had not had her milk and butter as usual, having noticed that she looked ill at their last meeting; but Susan decided that should this happen she would retreat to the back of the house and lock all the doors as if she had gone out. She took care that some of her neighbours should see her at a distance, in the piece of ground at the back, hanging the clothes to dry on a line as usual, so that if Mrs. Proudfoot

inquired of them she would hear that Miss Tremlett was not laid up or anything but going on in her usual fashion, aloof from other people. Disguised in a print overall and a sun-bonnet the figure in the garden might have been anybody's, and after the first choking fear in showing herself at all Susan's hard determination triumphed over her nerves and for some days she went in and out of her back premises as usual, though never at the front. The opinion in other cottages was that Susan was having a big wash before she went away—the news having, of course, spread through the village from Mrs. Harris—and they respectfully let her alone.

The question of food was not so much a problem as it would have been to a less frugal living woman. The baker's boy left the bread in the porch every day, and after he had gone a hand and arm came through the cautiously opened door and took it in. Like all her class Susan missed her milk and butter more than people supposed to be in easier circumstances, who ate margarine and drank tea with lemon in it during the War while the working people would rather go without altogether than put up with such substitutes. But her fear was greater than her need, and she eked out the butter she had fortunately bought from the farm and drank her tea with tinned milk obtained by the doctor's orders when Mrs. Weston was very ill (owing to a local scare of tuberculosis in the cows), and which, of course, was never opened. She had looked into her store cupboard as the inhabitants of a town might do during a siege, and found that she could live for a week without being driven out of her house. Tea, butter, cheese, the daily bread for which she mechanically prayed in the Lord's Prayer, a little rice, fresh eggs from her hens, and vegetables from her small garden—there was nothing else except some home-made jam which she used with her

evening bread to save the butter, feeling the deprivation the more from the craving of Janet Greer's body. It had been used to more nourishment than Susan gave it, and to less hard work, and she took a grim pleasure in driving the flaccid muscles to scrub and clean, and denying the loose mouth the substantial meals for which it almost watered.

It troubled Susan in her turn as to the other woman's use of her own body, supposing that they had exchanged. She suspected that the mind and will of Janet Greer were inferior to her own, and that her nature was more self-indulgent. The scrupulous neatness and plainness of her transformation would not appeal to her, and she would neglect it as a sloven. The idea of her smooth hair unkempt and her face unwashed touched Susan to the quick. Her substitute might even attempt to mitigate her altered appearance with some decoration that would only make her ridiculous, and dress the spare body in clothes such as the younger women wore in Wennborough and which were even more unsuited to it than her purchase of the red crêpe. Susan writhed to think of it.

Her own working garments were part of her problem, and she planned many ways of disposing of them before she hit upon a plan. Fortunately for her the neighbourhood only recognised her in one or two gowns, her "best dress" having been so carefully hoarded that it had never seen the light in Redincote. It was a sober grey dress of a good material, less old-fashioned than her everyday gowns because it had been bought later, just before Susan left her own home to come to Somerset. It was intended for half-mourning for her mother, and was ready-made out of a shop in Chester. Susan had thought it quite up-to-date on the few occasions when she had worn it, but on Janet Greer's figure she found that it was too long and too spare. She was unwillingly obliged to

shorten it and let it out over the fuller breast, but she was clever with her needle, and once she started she mechanically began to alter it to a greater semblance of gowns she had seen in the market town. There was a bit of old lace belonging to Mrs. Weston that she washed and ironed and turned into a small collar over the neck of the gown which gave it a demure prettiness she had not planned. It was far too good for every day, in her estimation, but she judged that Janet Greer would have extravagant ideas and never think to save her clothes. She was unconsciously beginning to "dress the part" she had been forced to assume.

The inspiration to dispose of the better known of her clothes came to her through her habit of never throwing anything away that might be useful—a thriftiness of the northern country. The grocer in Wennborough had wrapped up her piece of despised Cheddar in a sheet of one of the daily papers, on which was an advertisement column. Susan was going to put aside the paper to light the fire, for she was obliged to have one in the morning even in summer for her cooking, when her eye fell on the alluring offer of a wardrobe dealer to purchase old clothes of any description. It was not the prices offered so much as the easy way of disposing of Susan Tremlett's possessions that attracted her, for she was sensible enough to know that her skirt and blouses and her walking coat would fetch little beyond the postage. She made a parcel of the clothes she thought might betray her, and put them in a cupboard addressed to the wardrobe dealer to be posted as soon as it was possible, and she wrote her new name and her address for enclosure with more shrinking than any other act of her metamorphosis. It seemed to her that with the stiff penning of Miss Janet Greer, The Stone Cottage, Redincote, Nr. Wennborough, Somerset,

she had burned her boats. She was no longer Susan Tremlett, save in all her mental and spiritual faculties. She was Janet Greer.

And now came the moment when she must face the outside world, and see if the deception she had planned would stand the strain of belief in its possibility. She had been nearly a week without going beyond her own garden patch at the back of her house, and her stores were running short. The most natural course was for her to take her can—as Susan Tremlett had done—and go across the road for milk, and once the mind of Susan Tremlett was made up the body of Janet Greer had to follow. She was perplexed how to dress on this first occasion of going out, for it was still very hot and the grey gown was unsuitable enough to draw attention, when she suddenly remembered the red dress that she had bought in the sale at "Doris's." It had been an extravagance to Susan Tremlett and inappropriate except for some occasion only to be dreamt of in connection with John Vholes; but she felt bitterly that it was much more in keeping with Janet Greer, and when she put it on she found that she was right. The soft crêpe clung to the round figure and was just the right length, and the warm colour suited the dark hair and eyes and seemed faintly reflected in the pink cheeks. She had tried to brush the short wavy hair as smooth and flat as Susan's shining coil, but in spite of her it broke loose and curled about her ears and forehead. She could see that Janet was good-looking and had become more attractive still in the cherry-coloured gown, and she resented it as if she had been forced to decorate a rival with her own possessions. She would never wear the alluring red dress now to approve herself in Farmer Vholes' eyes. She had hoped desperately every night when she went to bed that her own body might be restored to her

in sleep as it had been taken from her; but she had begun to lose heart.

She walked across the road without any covering to her head because she had no hat to go with the red dress, but it was so early that there was no one about except the men on the farm, and they were not visible at the moment of her appearance. The side door was open as she came up to the farm-house, but there was no sign of Mrs. Proudfoot, and the dairy did not look as well-kept as it used to the spirit of Susan Tremlett looking through Janet Greer's eyes. She pulled the bell, and after a minute or so one of the milkmaids came in from the back premises and stared at her with open surprise.

"Morning to you. I want to know if I can have some milk," said Janet Greer's voice pleasantly. "I understand Miss Tremlett used to have it, and I've taken her cottage. She said you'd serve me the same as her if I asked."

"Step inside, will you?" replied the milkmaid civilly. "I'll ask Mrs. Proudfoot. She's laid up."

That accounted for the fact that she had never come to the cottage to ask if Susan were ill, and Janet Greer saw that it was a point in her favour. The milkmaid's placid acceptance of her as a stranger steadied her nerve, and her heart began to beat less rapidly as she came into the dairy.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said. "Is it the housekeeper Miss Tremlett spoke of?"

"Yes, she's an old lady to have a fall, and she's not likely to be about yet awhiles, doctor says. She slipped up nearly a week ago, and broke her thigh, and old bones don't mend like young ones, he says."

"Dear! dear! that's bad." Janet Greer, with the milk-can in her hand, waited in the cool dairy while the girl went into the house, and after a few minutes came back to say she could have the milk, and would she be wanting it every day?

"Yes, please."

"Is Miss Tremlett gone to Australia? We heard as she was going," asked the girl curiously.

"She went off one morning early before I got here. I was expecting to see her, for it's awkward taking over a place and not being shown anything, but she'd left the key under the mat and a note, and I've been doing as best I could and getting settled in. We arranged it all by letter, so I suppose she thought she was free to go off."

"That was like Miss Tremlett. She was a close one! But to go like that, and leave you to do for yourself like, and you a stranger! That's too bad."

"I'm getting along now. The house is clean, anyhow," said Janet. "I'd be glad if you'd tell me where I can do a bit of shopping. The village looks small."

"Oh, there's no shops there as will suit *you*!" said the milkmaid, with flattering admiration in her eyes for the red dress and the stockings to match. "You'll have to take the bus to Wennborough. It goes in every day at half-past ten."

"Thank you," said Janet Greer. She was turning away with her filled can when she remembered the longed-for butter. "Could you let me have half a pound of butter, too?" she said. "I'd almost forgot I had none. Shall I pay now, or wait till the end of the week?"

"Oh, wait till the end of the week, like Miss Tremlett does. Mrs. Proudfoot keeps the accounts still. Who'll I put it down to?"

"Miss Greer—my name's Janet Greer." And as she said the words she was aware that John Vholes had come into the side entry from the house and was looking at her with an attention he had never given to Susan Tremlett; but it was the heart of Susan Tremlett that beat in response to his presence.

"'Tis the lady who has taken Miss Tremlett's cottage," the milkmaid explained hurriedly. "Mrs. Proudfoot says we can let her have milk and butter the same."

"Has Miss Tremlett gone away? We heard something of it," said Vholes in his hearty voice. He also was looking at the red dress which clung so delectably to the round breast and hips, and the red stockings to match. Janet Greer turned round and gave him her full face with an unsuspected effort. It seemed to her as if her own soul looked out of those brown eyes to claim him hers—Susan Tremlett's—and must betray her. But his sly, half-approving glance saw nothing but the comeliness of a stranger.

"Miss Tremlett's gone to Australia," she said with difficulty. "And she let me her cottage. I'm sorry the housekeeper's had an accident."

"Yes, it's a bad business," said the farmer, shaking his head. "I don't know how we're going to manage if she doesn't get about again. Dolly, you go and see that there's water for the poultry. I found their trough dry yesterday. Cut along." The milkmaid fled, and John pushed up his short thick hair with his sunburnt hands. "Things are going to sixes and sevens since the old woman hasn't been by to see to 'em," he confided to Janet. "I shall have to get a woman in from the village, and they're infernal gossips. There's no one to cook, and no one to look after the old lady except the nurse from Wennborough, and she can only come mornings and evenings."

"I can cook," said Janet rather suddenly. It was Susan Tremlett who forced the words from the full lips, for she was aware of a disinclination in the ease-loving body to undertake extra work. But Susan's ruthless will would make her work in earnest for John Vholes. "I'd be willing to come over and help if you're in a difficulty.

I could come and get the meals and see to Mrs. Proudfoot till you're settled with someone else, and do my own cleaning up between whiles."

"Could you?" said John more hopefully. "I'd much rather have someone like yourself if it's not asking too much. The girls can do the rough work, but they make a mess of the food."

"I could come in later to-day and see to lunch if you like." The capable brain behind Janet Greer's incapable face saw a solution from the food difficulty that was becoming serious. For owing to the extravagance of the red dress and her last week's shopping, there was not much money left in Susan's purse. The only solace was that if she had not bought the dress she would have paid in the money to her post-office account, and the dress was useful, while the money in the post office was impossible to get at save as Susan Tremlett. Her small income came to her quarterly from the North, and in deference to her having no banking account was always sent by registered letter in notes or postal orders; but it was not due for another month, and in the meantime she would have had to depend on the sale of such eggs and garden produce as she had. The post office had been her bank, and she had drawn on it when she must, but that supply was cut off unless she could think of a way to obtain it by letter. She could still write in Susan Tremlett's difficult stiff caligraphy (writing had always been a labour to her harder than any scrubbing or mending), but if she let Janet Greer's hand have its way she found that it wrote more easily, mechanically, in better-educated characters. Thus she could keep the two personalities separate and contrive a correspondence between them if necessary, but she was too ignorant to know if she could draw on a written order to the post office, and (fortunately

for herself) too cautious to try. In the meantime the work at the farm would be a godsend, and she must sell what she could from her fowls and garden.

John agreed to her proposition with relief mingled with a little apprehension of Mrs. Proudfoot's opposition. The old woman clung very naturally to her authority, and resented even the maids on the place superseding her. He told Janet Greer that she must see the housekeeper first, but he thought Mrs. Proudfoot would prefer a stranger to one of the villagers, the same as himself. Then he went upstairs to the housekeeper's bedroom, and after a few minutes called to Janet to follow him up.

Susan had never been farther than the hall or dining-room in the Manor Farm as yet, but the excitement she would have felt in seeing the upper floors was swallowed up in a renewal of nervous fear should Mrs. Proudfoot question her about herself. It was a pleasant, rambling old place, though not as old as her own, and the bedrooms were large and well lighted though irregular in shape, and generally up or down two steps from the passage way. She found Mrs. Proudfoot propped up in bed and a wasted image of her old cheery, bustling air. The spirit of Susan Tremlett was shocked to see how a week of pain and illness had aged her, but with the indifferent pessimism of the working class she decided that the old lady's day was past, and that it was unlikely she would ever come downstairs again.

"This is Miss Greer," said John in off-hand introduction. "She's offered to come and cook my lunch and see to you too in place of those girls. I'll leave you to settle it between you." And, manlike, he tramped downstairs again to his work, leaving a situation that might turn to warfare to the feminine combatants.

"That is neighbourly of you, Miss Greer," said the old housekeeper stiffly. Susan saw the sharp glance at her

dress and her short hair with no hat to disguise it, and recognised the hostility in it at once. The curious part was that she agreed with Mrs. Proudfoot, and disapproved of Janet Greer's appearance as much as the old woman. "I hear you've taken Miss Tremlett's cottage," the housekeeper went on grudgingly, evidently regretful that it was not a person more of Susan's own type.

"Yes, she's gone," said Janet, anxious to ingratiate Mrs. Proudfoot, but afraid of saying too much. "She went last week."

"She was looking terribly ill when I saw her—not fit to travel, let alone a long journey to Australy. We shall miss her as a neighbour. She was a straight, self-respecting young woman, was Susan Tremlett, one of the old-fashioned sort, and I daresay more natural to me like at my age." A spasm of pain crossed her drawn face, and she sighed impatiently under her helplessness.

"Can I ease those pillows for you ?" suggested Janet. "Mr. Vholes was telling (talking) about my making myself useful to you." She approached the bed to straighten the pillows, which had certainly slipped, but the patient warned her off.

"Nurse'll do it when she comes, thank you. I'm afraid of anyone who doesn't know about broken legs touching of me. They maids is so rough !" she added piteously.

"I wouldn't hurt you—I'm used to it," Janet Greer began eagerly, but stopped suddenly. Susan had had so much nursing, of her father and mother and lastly her old aunt, that she knew herself expert though uncertificated, but of Janet Greer's experience she knew nothing and had not yet sketched any outline of her past life beyond the fact that she came from London. Susan had been to London more than once, and recognised its vast size and possibilities of vagueness.

"At all events I'll see to your food being right," she added. "You'd like a bowl of soup and some fresh toast, and a steamed pudding—you could eat that, couldn't you?"

"Has Master John engaged you as cook?" asked Mrs. Proudfoot resentfully. "He's been going on about the meals, and getting someone in. I know the girls is no good with the range, but I'll be down again in a week or so, doctor says, and able to look over 'em."

"Yes, of course you will," Janet agreed, though she disapproved the kindly deception. Mrs. Proudfoot would not be downstairs for many weeks, if she were ever able to walk again. "But I can do for you till you're up again, and welcome."

"You'll find the oven wants knowing," said the housekeeper grudgingly. "And you'll mess yourself in those clothes if you're to keep things as I had 'em."

"I'll keep it all as clean as you did," retorted the spirit of Susan Tremlett somewhat too sharply for Janet Greer, but her pride was touched. Even Mrs. Proudfoot had never been more particular in her work than she. "And as to clothes, there's an overall Miss Tremlett left behind her she said I could have, and I'll wear that. It's old enough, but it's clean."

"You can trust Susan Tremlett for that. I never see a neater body," said Mrs. Proudfoot, somewhat mollifying Susan's ruffled temper. "Well, I s'pose if Master John's agreed, you've got to come. But I warn you, Miss Greer, he's particular. Likes his meat with the gravy in it, but not too much done, and a suet pudding's got to be as light as cake."

"If you tell me his likes and just how you did for him, I'll be all right following *you*," said Janet cunningly, and Mrs. Proudfoot gave way, though still reluctant.

"It's better than having Mrs. Harris in my kitchen with

her clacking tongue," she admitted. "But I wish I could ha' got downstairs to see to things a bit, even if you do the cooking. Where d'you come from?"

"London."

"Then you're used to gas stoves, and no use for a range, I suppose?"

"I've cooked all ways," said Janet Greer as she turned to the door. "Gas stove or range and over oil. There's no saying what you can't do, and not much matter either so long as you're clean."

Mrs. Proudfoot was more favourably impressed with those final words than she had been throughout the interview. She did not know that it was Susan's spirit challenging her own, but when her lunch came up on a tray she admitted that the soup was good, the toast perfectly crisp, and the steamed pudding as light as her own. Janet Greer's face was rather flushed and heated from the oven, but the plain clean print overall was reminiscent of Susan Tremlett and disguised the offending red dress.

"I'll run up and bring the tray down before I wash up," she said. "Don't you hurry. I've got Mr. Vholes' lunch to get yet, but I thought I'd bring yours first, you being sick."

"I hope you'll have some yourself, Miss Greer, before it's cold," said Mrs. Proudfoot, more civilly than she had yet spoken. "And make one of them girls help you wash up. They've plenty of time."

Janet Greer nodded, and hurried back to the kitchen to see to the real trial of her skill—John Vholes' lunch, or rather dinner, for his midday meal was really the principal one in the day. It was the first time she had cooked for him, and though it was through the medium of Janet Greer she felt that she was on her mettle and must satisfy him at all costs. She was glad to have pleased Mrs. Proudfoot, but the Master's dinner was of far more importance.

John Vholes was well satisfied with his food that day, and no wonder. It was the first time for a week that it had been anything but under or over-cooked, badly served and generally unpalatable. He was a man with strong appetites, and Susan's skill made him at ease with all the world. He went into the kitchen just to see how Janet Greer was getting on, and to tell her that he had enjoyed his food, and found her washing up with a cooler face than Mrs. Proudfoot had seen, and the neat print overall giving her a workmanlike air as if she had already taken charge of the neglected kitchen. John gave an unconscious sigh of relief for his creature comforts, and wondered if he could induce her to stay.

"Hope you're comfortable, Miss Greer," he said with a diffidence so unusual that it made him almost sheepish. "I know *I* am. That's the first time I've had a good meal midday since Mrs. Proudfoot went upstairs. But we must come to some arrangement about this. We can't expect you to work for nothing."

Susan, through Janet's lips, longed to tell him that she would never take money for what she gave him—it was like sacrilege to her to think of it. But her imperative need for money made her chafe in vain, and she saw that she must accept what he offered, be it little or much.

"I get my meals, Mr. Vholes," she said quietly. "And I'd have to cook for myself anyway."

"Cooking for one isn't cooking for three or four," said John practically. "And there's the old lady to look after. Shall we say ten shillings a week, or fifteen if you'll come over and get breakfast?"

"I'll take the ten shillings as you're good enough to offer it, Mr. Vholes, but not a penny more," said Janet Greer firmly. "And I'll be over early enough, never fear. It will save me a fire to light at home in the mornings."

"And it'll help with your rent," added John, a little puzzled by her sturdy independence. Instinct told him that Janet Greer ought to have taken everything she could get from a man, and made a favour of it too, not flung it back in his face. Like Mrs. Proudfoot he had not the key to the abnormal housing of the soul of Susan Tremlett in Janet Greer's body.

"I don't doubt Miss Tremlett made a good bargain for herself, and you've got to pay the piper!" he said slyly. "She was a hard nut to crack, wasn't she? and looked it too!"

"She's only charging me five shillings a week," said Janet Greer as she turned away. But it was Susan who was cut to the quick.

During the weeks which followed she was to miss no pang of such criticisms on her character, though from other mouths than John's she cared less. Mrs. Proudfoot was the only one to do justice to her good qualities, and women like Mrs. Harris clacked of her as unneighbourly, very close, and too mean to ask you to a cup o' tea even. The best they could say of her was that she was over-clean.

"Well, there's such a thing as being *too* clean, to my mind, and your things wear out with always scrubbing. There's others would be more missed than Miss Tremlett, for all she fancied herself coming from the North!"

They did not, after all, reap much advantage from the loss of Susan, as far as hospitality went; though it was the general opinion that Janet Greer would have been sociable if she had not taken Mrs. Proudfoot's place at the farm. There were women in the village who resented this, having hoped for the job themselves, and they were not slow to say evil of Miss Greer's relations with the good-looking farmer. Others thought the newcomer was simply making a fool of herself, and looking too high.

"John Vholes is not the one to marry his cook!" they said. "He's been making his choice a long time, and could have the pick of the neighbourhood. Not but what Miss Greer's a good-looking woman, and comes from London too."

It was the universal opinion at the start that Janet Greer was of a softer mould than Susan Tremlett had been, and would be easier to get along with, even to the point of intimacy. But despite her pleasant voice and face it was wonderful how hard she worked and the amount of work she got out of other people. The maids at the farm hated her, but found themselves driven by a stronger will than Mrs. Proudfoot's; and, instead of the lax rule they had looked forward to, a still more strenuous standard of efficiency was demanded of them. There was the added sting of jealousy in their resentment, which would not have been the case if it had been the former Susan Tremlett whose determination drove them, for they would have put her on a par with Mrs. Proudfoot as far as personal attraction went. Naturally enough the girls took a certain sexual interest in John Vholes as the most important man on the farm, and a bachelor, though they easily consoled themselves for his indifference with the farm labourers. But Janet Greer's comeliness made her in some sort a rival with the advantage of a superior position even if she were "gettin' on" compared to their youth. There might have been a mutiny if they had not been shrewdly sure whom the farmer himself would uphold.

Mrs. Proudfoot never came downstairs again, as Janet Greer had foreseen. She lingered on into the early Autumn, and then when the whole staff were busy with harvest she took a turn for the worse and died rather suddenly after a few days of a condition between sleeping and waking. Owing to the maids being engaged in the fruit-picking, and the men in the fields, Janet was the

only person with her when she died, and of what really took place she never told.

Mrs. Proudfoot had been nearly unconscious all the morning, and had hardly taken any food for the past twenty-four hours, but Janet went up to her at midday to try to give her the medicine the doctor had prescribed. She was lying so quietly, and with hardly a movement of her breast, that for a moment the younger woman thought the end had come already. The intelligence of Susan Tremlett, looking through Janet Greer's eyes, recognised that it was at least very near. Mrs. Proudfoot's face had sharpened, and already the lines seemed fading into a waxen pallor. Susan was not afraid of death, she had seen it too often, and to her matter-of-fact mind it was just an inevitable ceasing of life that people wanted no more. Janet Greer leaned down over the bed to catch the slightest respiration of the quiescent body, which was hardly perceptible, and as she did so there came a last rally and the dying woman opened her eyes and looked at her. There was a sudden convulsion of the limbs as if with fear, and into the eyes came a look of recognition that made Janet start back. Mrs. Proudfoot struggled to speak, her lips almost framed a name, but the words died out in a puff of breath and she fell back silent without saying it.

Janet Greer slowly retreated, backwards, from the bed, her own limbs trembling so that she could hardly reach the door. What it was that Mrs. Proudfoot had seen she did not know unless it were the spirit of Susan Tremlett revealed to her through the alien body, but that she had seen and recognised something that almost brought her back to life was certain. She had died before she could utter it, and the danger had passed with her last breath.

It required all Susan's fortitude to return to the room after a minute's breathing space and straighten the limbs

and do the last offices for the dead. There was something in Mrs. Proudfoot's face even now of surprise, or she thought so, and she waited anxiously for the final rigidity of death to wipe it out. When she returned to the kitchen she found that her own limbs were still trembling, and she could hardly get on with her work. John Vholes, coming back for a cup of tea and to inquire for his old housekeeper, found the new one sitting by the singing kettle with an unusually strained face and idle hands.

"She's gone," she said without looking up.

"Is she?" he asked stupidly, not because he doubted it but because he did not know what to say. "Well, we were expecting it, weren't we? Doctor thought she couldn't last the day. She was a faithful soul and a decent living woman. Twenty years and more she's been at the farm, and I shall miss her. I suppose her folks will come down to the funeral? They've not troubled her much so far." Then he glanced at Janet's frightened face and laid his broad hand on her shoulder as he had never done before.

"Come, come! this has upset you, but you mustn't take on," he said with a kindly familiarity born of the moment. "I'm sure you've nothing to reproach yourself with, for you've been as good as a daughter to the poor old soul. I don't know what we should have done without you, Janet."

She rose unsteadily, trying to pull herself together. She did not want him to think her an hysterical woman who could not look on death without flinching, not realising that the feminine weakness of her attitude called out the protective quality in his robust manhood. Despite herself she swayed a little on her feet, and the hand on her shoulder dropped to her waist and held her safely for a moment. The thrill of his touch made her quiver again, but the blood came back to her face in a more becoming flush.

"I'm not faint—but it gave me a turn," she said confusedly. "I'll get your tea in a minute——"

"You sit still, my girl, and I'll get you a drop of brandy," said Vholes with an authority over her that was the sweeter to Susan Tremlett because he was the first man to exert it. She heard him go into the dining-room with his heavy tread and dropped her rosy face in her hands for a minute with a feeling like prayer. So strong was Susan's passion that it blotted out everything for the minute except the fact that John Vholes had held her in a half-embrace and spoken to her as if she belonged to him. The body of Janet Greer through which she felt and heard was burnt away by her own greater spirit.

But she remembered it a minute later when he came back with the brandy and made her drink it in a cup of tea, because his eyes so plainly saw the face that was not her own. "You're looking more like yourself again," he said approvingly. "You were that peaked when I came in that you might have been—who do you think? You won't thank me!—you might have been Miss Tremlett. You don't want to look like her, do you? Well then, drink this up and then give us a cup. I'll go and take a look at Mrs. Proudfoot presently."

"I've done all that's necessary," said Janet Greer dully, turning away. A raging jealousy of the body she was forced to inhabit had overtaken Susan, and if Vholes had not been present she would have plucked and torn at her own flesh. She did not want him to touch her any more, it was like watching him touch a rival, and yet she was tortured with a desire for his arm about her again. For if it was Janet Greer's body he clasped it was Susan's senses that responded to him.

After Mrs. Proudfoot's death she was haunted by the fear that Vholes would really get a permanent cook-

housekeeper, and that she would be superseded in her turn. Mrs. Proudfoot's presence in the house, bed-ridden though she was, had in some sort countenanced Janet Greer's, but the gossip in the village had been rife enough to reach the farm even as it was, and the curbed resentment of the milkmaids—forced to work harder by reason of Susan's driving power—no doubt accentuated it. When Mrs. Proudfoot was dead there was no palliating Janet Greer's position by saying that she was there till the old housekeeper could get about again, and Vholes himself was uneasily conscious that he must make up his mind whether to defy his public and ask Janet to stay permanently, or to get an older woman, a widow for choice, with no physical attractions.

When it came to the point he was aware that he did not want to lose Janet Greer. She was methodical and kept the maids up to their work as well as doing her own, and she had taken over the household accounts and kept them as well as Mrs. Proudfoot had done. He would go far before he found such a good cook and one who studied his ways as Janet did. There was besides a lurking inclination towards her from his manhood that might have justified the suspicions of his neighbours if she had been what she looked. She puzzled John, who felt instinctively that there should have been some feminine guile in her to suit her face and figure which appealed to his lower nature; but the spirit that looked out of her brown eyes held a man in check. There was no coquetry in them, no invitation to licence, but an indomitable self-respect that daunted him.

He did not want to marry her, exactly, and a struggle went on in his mind between the temptation of her propinquity and the feeling that the only way to gratify it was a legal union. She would never hear of anything else. He had been subconsciously proud of being a

bachelor and escaping the efforts of women of all ages to "catch him"; but if he did marry he meant it to be someone younger than Janet Greer—a girl in her first youth, and someone whose family and surroundings he knew. They must be people of substance like himself, if he were to do himself credit. Of Janet Greer he knew nothing except that she had a sister married in Canada, who never wrote to her. (This happened to be the simple truth, but it suited Susan's need better than an invention and she told it to save further questioning.) She had neither position, money, nor friends in the neighbourhood, and she occupied a subordinate position in the Manor Farm instead of having a home of her own. All of which John Vholes considered many times, but it always ended in the irritated feeling that her very lack of the possessions he valued in a wife made her the more independent of him. If she chose to pack up her boxes and give him notice that she was going, she might vanish out of his life as suddenly as she had come into it, leaving him to find a better mate if he could.

That he was seriously thinking of solving the problem by marrying Janet Greer, did not occur to Susan. She was as much in dread of her uncertain position at the farm as he was, and tortured herself with his attentions to other women when he was in Wennborough as much as of old, as well as with the chance of being superseded. When he offered to take her for a drive in the little car one day she was eager with delight, but did not regard it as a serious attention. In fact she demurred on account of arrears of work, being so happy that she played with her happiness as a woman more versed in the art of managing men might have done to draw him on.

"There's the poultry accounts to make up, and some ironing to do—Dolly spoiled one of your shirts last week,

and it had to be washed over again—and the jam. I don't know as I've a right to go joy-riding," she said, though she trembled with anticipation.

"Never mind the work, let it go for once. You'll make it up somehow, I know. I've got to go out into the country about some heifers I'm thinking of buying, and the jaunt'll do you good. Put on that red dress you wore when I first saw you, and do me credit!"

He laughed as if it were a joke, but there was a little more colour in his ruddy face than sun and wind had brought there. Janet Greer had flushed a little also, with the sting of a memory that he could not guess at. She could never put on that cherry-coloured dress without remembering that it was Susan Tremlett who had bought it for this very purpose of catching the farmer's eye, and that she had never worn it.

It was a warm day in early October, so warm that the reaped fields seemed to bask in the heat. The little car ran well and smoothly in John's hands now that he was more expert, and the day was ideal for motoring, without wind or dust. They did not go through Wennborough, though they followed the course of the Wenn for some distance through the flat water meadows and then climbed the low range of hills to the grazing country on the other side. Here were richer farms than Redincote's, and sleeker cattle than the broken-coat of Somerset; but John Vholes kept a better breed than his neighbours, as Mrs. Proudfoot had long ago told Susan, and bought from a distance rather than in the local market. Janet Greer sat with her dreamy eyes on the flying landscape and spoke little, but the face under the close red hat she had bought to match the dress was irradiated with some inward glow. John's attention was given to his driving, and he did not speak much either, save to point out certain features in the

landscape and farms that he knew. When they reached their destination and he went to inspect the heifers for sale, she sat still in the car; but by and bye he came back with the other farmer and introduced her, rather to her surprise.

"This is my housekeeper, Miss Greer—Mr. Wildridge. I brought her out for a breath of air, for she never gives herself a holiday if I don't."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Greer. Come in and let my missus give you some tea."

All Susan's stiffness and shyness returned under the unlooked for invitation, but the face of Janet Greer did not betray her. It was composed and comely in its red setting of the little hat, and her quiet manner rather impressed Mr. Wildridge, who would have had his shrewd suspicions of her relations with Vholes had she been more self-assertive. Mrs. Wildridge was a fair buxom woman, hospitable and talkative herself, but she took a fancy to Janet as a good listener and a sensible woman who did not seem to have her head turned by any attention paid her.

"And John Vholes might have done much worse," she said to her husband afterwards. "I always thought if he was caught at last 'twould be by a girl. I didn't think he'd have as much sense as to choose a woman like Miss Greer. Knows farm work well, she does, and is pretty too in her style."

"H'm," said Wildridge, too wise to express his real opinion, which was even more favourable than his wife's. "She's not much this side forty!"

"Nor is John Vholes. Indeed, *he'll* not see forty again this year or next. You mark my words, Dick, there'll be a mistress to the Manor Farm within six months, and that's the woman."

"Vholes did say she was wonderful clever at making things run easy, and he seemed pleased with her even after

old Mrs. Proudfoot. But that doesn't always mean marriage, Bessy."

"It will in this case, or he'll lose her," said Mrs. Wildridge with conviction. "And if he does that he's a fool!"

"It did seem a bit marked his bringing her out to see us. But Vholes likes to make up his mind before he has a deal. He walked round those heifers a time or two before he bought 'em."

"He won't walk round Miss Greer," laughed Mrs. Wildridge. "He's made up his mind already, whether he knows it or no."

John had not really intended to ask Janet Greer to marry him when he took her to Wildridge's farm and introduced her to the farmer and his wife. It was an impulse, partly in defiance of public opinion, partly to see how it felt to have her with him as if she belonged to him. The success of the visit to the other farm may have biased him further in her favour, or perhaps he had made up his mind without knowing it, as Mrs. Wildridge said. As they drove home through the warm mellow evening he took his left hand from the driving wheel and laid it over hers as it lay on her lap.

"You're very quiet, Janet," he said. "What are you thinking of?"

"I was wishing it could go on—just this evening as it is—and never stop!" said the soul of Susan Tremlett through Janet Greer's parted lips.

"Are you so happy?" said John Vholes kindly, touched by her voice, though he did not know why.

"I do not know that I shall ever be so happy again," she said slowly, speaking to her own heart as much as to him.

John's grasp on her hand tightened, partly with excitement and a sudden tremor for the plunge he was about to take. "I've been thinking too," he said, steering the car

mechanically with one hand. "I've been thinking about you and me. We've both put off marrying, and we're not boy and girl. But we suit each other, don't we?" He gave a nervous laugh that was almost a giggle. "What do you think about it? Shall we have each other?"

The world stood still with Susan Tremlett. In her fondest dreams she had been John Vholes' wife, but she had scoffed at herself for such aspirations in reality. Now that it had come, it had come too soon. She was not ready for it. Moreover, wild thoughts of the other woman whom she was impersonating flashed across her brain to stagger her. Who was Janet Greer, maid or wife or widow? She had taken it for granted that the body she inhabited was virgin as her own, and described herself as a spinster as a matter of course. But there were certain things that puzzled her—sensations not entirely her own, a tendency to mechanical movements that suggested experiences unknown to her in her rigid morality. Janet Greer might be a married woman with children. To unite her body to another man was adultery, to Susan's mind—in law it was at least bigamy. She had never quite given up the idea that at some moment her own body might be restored to her in sleep, and though she had become used to the other woman's she had not been reconciled to it. If the change took place again, suddenly, and without warning, what would happen to her and John Vholes? She had hugged the thought to herself that it was her own mind and will and spirit that had done most for him, not the sluggish body of Janet Greer. Janet Greer was naturally self-indulgent, a slack woman who loved ease and would have worked for no man. It was Susan who had driven her to do the tasks that made life easier for John and woke him to the fact that he had a helpmate already in his household. But the tragedy of it was that it was Janet Greer whom John wished to make his

wife, the bodily presence of Janet Greer that drew his own manhood to it, and not the mind and spirit of Susan Tremlett.

She could not speak. But her hand convulsively closed on his and clung to it, as if she pleaded with herself that she could not let him go. Her passion for him had never lessened with the greater intimacy of the past weeks; if she knew his faults she knew also that she loved him better for them, loved all of him as a true woman does her own man. And he, feeling the pressure of her hand, took it naturally for consent. They were driving on a lonely road between the water meadows again, not many miles from home. John steered the car to the side of the rhyne or ditch which takes the place of a hedge in Somerset, stopped the engine, and turning to his companion took her suddenly in his arms. Her lips met his with a hunger that astonished him. It was as if she had been starving for his love, and had never betrayed herself till now when her mouth clung to his for minutes that hardly seemed to satisfy her.

"Why, Janet!" he said hoarsely as their lips parted for breath. "Why, my girl——!"

She dragged herself from him as if dazed. "You took me by surprise," she muttered in self-excuse. "I have not said—I have not said——"

John's face was ruddy with reflected passion. "Don't be foolish," he said bluntly. "You've done better than say. I didn't know you were so warm a woman, Janet, keeping me at a distance as you do! When we're married you'll be like that for me, won't you, darling?"

She did not answer, only begged him to get home as it was growing late, and her limbs trembled as if with cold, though they had just been hot as fire. He would have lingered, but her averted face seemed full of distress for

the moment of unguarded surrender, and he reluctantly took her home with a sly look at her now and then to remind her of his expectations for their future. After all, he thought, 'twas better she should be cold now and warm later, lest worse befell.

They were married in November, in the old ivy-grown church of Redincote where John's ancestors slept below the long grasses that were allowed to lie up for hay. Mr. Phippen, the Vicar, married them, and made pleasant little jokes on John's long bachelorhood, and Mrs. Phippen was most amiable to the bride and told her how much she had heard of her care and kindness to dear old Mrs. Proudfoot, and that her present happiness was certainly her reward. She did not know how the free spirit under the modest tulle veil resented her kindly patronage, but Susan's North-Country independence was hard put to it not to retort that she made no bargains for her duty, and had won her husband by right of love alone.

Janet Greer was married in white, with orange blossoms in her dark hair and a white silk dress. She was frugal even in this, for she made her own trousseau, but it was due to John she felt that his bride should look as others did in the tradition of twenty or thirty years ago. Susan was always a little behind her day in the matter of clothes, but on this occasion the personality of Janet Greer was more in the ascendant than that of her rival, at least as far as outward appearance went, and justified the display. The increasing lines of figure which might have led to the heaviness of middle age had been fined down by Susan's rigorous work, and whatever her age Janet Greer looked almost like a girl with a becoming colour in her face as she stood at the altar rails. John Vholes, very uncomfortable in a new suit made by the Wennborough tailor, and a late white rose in his button-hole, felt a satisfaction in the bride

that justified his choice and comforted him for his stiff collar and perspiring face. The little church was so full that the congregation overflowed into the churchyard and pelted the newly married pair as they came out with confetti in spite of the east wind that made it heroic to stand about. The wind did Janet Greer some good in one way, for had it not blown it might have rained, and she had a superstitious fear of rain on her wedding day. As it was, the sun came out in a sky blustering with clouds, and shone on the bride as she re-entered her husband's house for the first time as its mistress.

" 'Tis a good omen at least ! " she said below her breath. She wanted all the luck she could get, poor soul, for the terror of that day overshadowed its triumph for her. She was beset with the fear that suddenly, at the altar maybe, she should feel that " curious feeling " steal over her again, and change back then and there to Susan Tremlett in appearance as well as spirit. But nothing happened, and they ate the hearty wedding breakfast with wine for the guests and cider for the farm labourers and villagers, and when the bride went up to change her gown for a new crimson " costume " she breathed a prayer of gratitude to the inscrutable heavens that had looked down stonily on her disasters until this hour.

The farmer and his new wife went away for a week to Weston-super-Mare, principally because it was the easiest coast town to reach. Neither of them enjoyed the idleness of the holiday very much, for the wintry weather made it a duty rather than a pleasure to walk about on the sea front, and both were secretly anxious to get back to the routine of work they knew as well as a well-worn garment. It was far more of a honeymoon to Janet at least to come home and settle down in the cosiness of her own fireside with John.

John Vholes still filled her universe, and though his spirit was slower and duller than hers she had begun to fill his. He had known dimly that his wife was a pure woman and he had thought her so cautious as to be cold until that revealing moment in the car when he had first kissed her. He had not had much opportunity for love-making before marriage, or else Janet had eluded him again. But as a husband he found that purity and passion may go well together, and that she was rich in qualities that make marriage enough to satisfy a man. John never wanted another woman after his wife had held him in her arms, and the sensuousness of Janet's body seemed to be burnt clear of coarseness by the flame of Susan's spirit. She loved him so singly that she gave him all the hoarded treasure of her womanhood, which had never been frittered away elsewhere. He had been attracted by her in the first instance for a certain gaudiness of effect that he understood as beauty, and had liked her afterwards for the homely qualities that made for material comfort. When he asked her to marry him he was sufficiently fond of her to be tempted on both accounts, but it was a poor exchange for the devotion she had in store. It was after his marriage that he began to fall in love with her, until the words spoken at the altar rails became something more than an empty form: "With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow." John Vholes would have given her the earth if he could have compassed it, though he had the foolish idea that he was master in his own house, and that "the missus" did not know how much more she was to him than all his possessions.

Susan would have liked to have her own little property to bring him in her turn; but of course this was impossible. She had disposed of her tenancy of the cottage

by the simple means of writing to her mythical self in Australia and saying that she wished to give it up as she was going to be married. At the time of her wedding she had not had time to hear in response (as she was careful to calculate), but she had had one letter from Miss Smee, telling of the voyage and the new life in Adelaide, and giving the post office as an address if Susan cared to write. Susan adopted the suggestion of the post office as her own, and copied parts of the letter in her own stiff writing in reply to Janet Greer. It was easy to say that she had given away the envelope with the Australian stamp to someone she knew in London who was collecting, and she showed John the letter when he questioned her about her having the cottage on her hands. She had already had the forethought to write the first letter in which Susan made the arrangement for letting it, with a request that the rent might be sent to her as soon as she reached Australia. Janet of course had done nothing of the sort. It was much more convenient to write a receipt from Susan when she ought to have received the money, without the wastefulness of sending it abroad.

John Vholes looked at the two letters somewhat dubiously, and advised his wife to show them to a lawyer and get them stamped.

"'Tis all right as it happens, but I should have thought Miss Tremlett would have made more of a business deal of it," he said. "Was that all the agreement you had, my dear?"

"That was all. I was expecting to have things more settled before she left, but she had gone when I came down, as I told you. I expect she left in such a hurry she didn't have time to go to a lawyer."

"Well, you're well out of it. I don't like women's business. But she says here plain enough that as you

don't want the cottage no more she would like it shut up, and she'll take it as a favour if you'll go in now and then and air the rooms. 'Tis a pity it should go empty with so many married folk wanting houses. You might easily have sublet."

"I don't think she would let me," said Mrs. Vholes hastily. She hated the idea of some careless woman living in her cottage in disorder, with a parcel of children maybe to add to the mess, and never properly cleaned. She knew that Susan Tremlett could not come back to take possession unless something happened to her present *alias*; but as Janet Vholes she could go over any time and dust and air it and keep it speckless though unused. She admitted the extravagance of leaving it empty, but to let it was the one thing she felt she could not do.

"Miss Tremlett was terribly particular about me keeping it as she did, when she first wrote. She said she wanted things left just as she had them, and not even to move the furniture, if you remember. And she'd pay for repairs, knowing it was an ancient place and like to crumble, rather than have it get worse."

"Yes, I remember. A regular old maid she was, and fussy in her ways. Well, you'd better do as she says, my love, but don't go wearing yourself out because of Susan Tremlett. She'd an eye for a spect of dust, as my old Proudfoot often said!"

"Miss Tremlett was a clean woman," said Janet Vholes in pained self-defence; but it was the only protest she uttered.

She was glad to have the cottage off her hands save for an occasional cleaning up, for as the months went on it needed all her will power to run the Manor Farm as she felt it should be run and do her share of the work. In February it was evident to her that she was going to have

a child, and she was torn between her pride in her new house and her fear lest she should injure the burden she carried. For some time she held out against seeing a doctor, saying truly that she knew what was the matter with her and things that were natural had better be left to right themselves, but John's anxiety made her give way at last and send for the local practitioner. He was a newcomer, the old doctor who had included the village in his straggling practice having lately retired, and he frightened Janet by asking her bluntly if she had ever had a child before ?

"No, sir," said John Vholes' wife stiffly. "I had never been married before Mr. Vholes ! "

"H'm," remarked the doctor somewhat dryly. "It would have been better for you if you had. The second child is always a good follower to the first. What's your age ? "

"I am thirty-seven."

"You do as I tell you, and I'll bring you through all right. But mind ! you mustn't overdo the work. Some time or other you've had a strain, and you've got to be careful now. Good-bye. Let me know if anything happens you can't understand."

He left Mrs. Vholes speechless with anger and fright. She had never thought but what her present body was as healthy and sound as her former one and only wanted hard work to make it as wiry and in good condition. She had recognised at once by some fine intuition that the original Janet Greer, mind and body together, had been a sluggard—the tendency to fat and inertia in her limbs had told her that—and a self-indulgent woman. But something in the way the doctor looked and spoke after his examination suggested that Janet Greer might have had a child whether married or no, might almost have lived a loose life, and had certainly undergone some operation or narrowly escaped it. The very thought sickened Susan,

and filled her with choking rage to think that John's child should not have a strong healthy mother to give it every chance in life. The father was a clean man in the main—had been very clean since his marriage and temperate even on market days. What was she to say if it was from *her* that their child inherited weakness or came into the world handicapped? When John Vholes came in from work to hear the doctor's report he found his wife crying for the first time since he had known her. He stood staring at her in dismay, and then took her almost roughly in his arms.

"Janet! my deary, Doctor don't think there's something wrong? It be a child and nothing worse?"

"'Tis a child all right, but he frightened me," she sobbed. "He said I must be careful, or he seemed to think I'd have a bad time." She could not tell him more for the shame of Janet Greer's past life that scorched her. "John, if I'm taken and the baby lives, promise me you'll love it for the two of us—and bring it up clean and honest, whether it's boy or girl!"

But he would not listen to her tremors, for the secret fear in his own heart. "Doctor's frightened you for nothing, just to save you doing too much!" he assured her. "I told him the worker you were, and how you never spare yourself. Why, my dearie, you're not going to be taken from me—I could spare the sun out o' heaven better than your face from my home, love!"

The sudden and sincere emotion of the man brought the tears into his own eyes. For a minute they clung together, wet face to wet face, two people past their first youth and as matter-of-fact as anybody in their everyday world, but raised into something dignified and sacred by the reality of their love for each other.

It was Susan's spirit which put her own fear on one side

to comfort him, but from that day she had to struggle with the unknown experience of the past that might hamper her delivery of the child, coupled with the maddening question as to whose it would really be—her own or Janet Greer's ? The greater force of her own personality claimed it hers, but the body that conceived it, nourished it, and might threaten its very existence, was her rival's. In some moods she prayed that it might be like no one but its father, only and entirely John's child and not Janet's, if it might not be hers. But the yearning of her heart to her husband made its creation the crowning glory of their union, and the pent-up maternity in her cried out for her rights.

The baby was born in July, just a twelvemonth since the transformation that had made Susan Tremlett Janet Greer. The indomitable spirit of the vanished woman upheld the failing body that was only the shell of her passion and pain, and seemed as if it must triumph over her weakness and bring forth her child unscathed. She went down into the depths of her surging agony, and rose again undaunted until the first feeble cry assured her that a man was born into the world. But the doctor, laying the boy in the nurse's arms, believed that the mother had passed with that last effort, and half an hour after the dead child was laid in her arms. He went downstairs heavily to tell the widowed, childless husband, and the nurse left the room for a minute also before she did the last offices for the dead.

Then it seemed that a tremor passed over the rigid body, and slowly and dreadfully the woman who was left for dead raised herself. She took the mirror that they had held to her lips after her last fluttering breath, and looking in it saw once more the face of Susan Tremlett. It was so changed that anyone meeting her in the street might have passed her with a shudder and no further

recognition, but she knew her own body, though evil had befallen it. The hair was grey and had lost its smooth gloss, the face bore the lines of dissipation and something worse in the pitiful blue eyes and shaken lips. She raised her thin hands and tried to smooth her untidy hair to decency, she wiped the ruddled paint from her face and the ugly red from her wasted lips. The neatness and order that had been her pride were gone, but in grim triumph she knew with certainty that Janet Greer was dead and could do her no more harm, and that her own free spirit was passing from the wreck that Janet had made of her. With her hands folded on her breast she lay back—just as the sound of a heavy man's tread made the stair creak as he came up to look his last on the wife he had loved and his dead child.

Then the dim blue eyes opened once more and fell on the baby at her side. He was as fair and white as herself, the child of Susan Tremlett and her love for John Vholes, and not of Janet Greer's body. She made a last effort to draw the sheet up over her face and the child's, and as she did so she died.

The man laid his groping hand upon the handle of the door, stumbled into the room, and kneeling down by the bed hid his face against the unresponsive figure, his own frame heaving with strangled sobs. Still kneeling, he stretched his hand and drew the sheet away to look at his wife's face. . . .

III

"HEAR IT UNAWARE"

> " So hath it been, so be it—
> For who shall live and flee it ?
> But look that no man see it
> Or hear it unaware ;
> Lest all who love and choose him
> See Love, and so refuse him ;
> For all who find him lose him,
> But all have found him fair."
>
> A. C. SWINBURNE.

DIANA had run a thorn into her fat forefinger, and it hurt.

Had this happened in the house she would have run to Nurse as the person most potent to remove thorns ; but as it took place in the garden she looked for her mother. Diana had a distinct impression of having seen a short white skirt and elegant legs disappearing into the garden house, and she followed as fast as her own would let her, holding out the finger stiffly before her as something very terrible and to be taken seriously.

At four years old one cannot cover the ground very fast, but she did her best and she was not crying—yet ; only her face was puckered into an absurd likeness of her father's when he sat on the Bench for a poaching case. There is no doubt that he objected to sending a man to prison for " a bit of sport " as much as his daughter did to thorns.

The soft green lawn that was so delightful to roll on had never seemed so wide before. Diana tried to run, tripped, and nearly added to her sense of injury that sweetbriar has thorns, by coming down on her nose. As she clutched at her own balance she reached the bushes that screened

the garden house, and to her dismay heard *two* voices issuing from the interior. One was her mother's, softened to a murmur that she could not distinguish; but the other was Major O'Reilley's, and she had been taught, even at four years old, that she was *never* to intrude when "Mage' Jack" was talking to "Mummy."

Major O'Reilley's voice was usually a pleasant one, given to small jokes and jolly laughter which attracted Diana and the dogs; but to-day it was hoarse and violent and somehow made her afraid, though he was saying things that had often been said to herself.

"My darling, my beauty, I can't help it—I could eat you up with kisses!"

Very like what Auntie Belle said at bedtime—but oh, how different in that great fierce man's voice! It sounded as if he were really going to eat someone up, for it was a hungry voice that was vaguely threatening.

Diana checked herself, really frightened; but her need for her mother was greater than her fear. She was just summoning her dauntless little courage to face Mage' Jack and his new voice, when she saw something else that stopped her at once and for all.

Leaning through the screen of bushes and half hidden by them like herself, was a boy's head. He was obviously peeping into the garden house further than she could see, and the malicious leer on his face was frightful to her. His very red lips were curled up at the corners showing two rows of perfect, sharp teeth, and his eyes were half closed as though his enjoyment were something like a poisonous sweetmeat on the tongue. The face was so wicked and so cruel in its sport, that Diana stood transfixed, staring at him.

He did not seem to see her. He was too intent on the couple in the garden house. And, recovering herself

sufficiently to fly, the little girl crawled through the thick bushes until she reached the gate that led into the wood beyond the plantation of rhododendrons. She was forbidden to go into this wood alone, because somewhere in it there was a deep bathing pool and she might tumble in, but the events of the last few minutes crowded into her tiny experience made her mad and blind with terror and distress, to the losing of all authority over her movements. She had not liked Major O'Reilley's voice and the new sounds in it causing familiar words to have a dark and dreadful meaning. But he had not frightened her nearly so much as the red-haired boy who was peeping and prying through the bushes. She had never seen this boy before, she was quite sure of that even though she was so tiny, and she never wished to see him again.

"Naughty, ugly boy!" she sobbed as she ran on and on along the track into the wood. "Hurted Di!"

Somehow the mental revulsion had got mixed up with the physical hurt, and she was sure he was responsible for the thorn in her finger. She was sobbing in reality now, the tears streaming down her baby face and blinding her so that several times she slipped and fell over the mossy roots of trees and the unevenness in the woodland path. But she always picked herself up and went on, though the crying threatened to become a roar, until she was quite a long way from home and somewhere near the heart of the wood.

Then, suddenly, she lost the path. But it did not much matter, because she had lost herself long since. She tripped and stumbled amongst the trunks of great trees, and, crying bitterly, emerged in an open glade that was like fairyland.

The trees stood back here as if they formed a rearguard, and at their feet lay the great pool fringed with blue and yellow iris in breaking glory, for the month was May.

Diana had never seen such green turf as floored the glade, or such masses of wild violets left blooming from the early Spring. It was all so beautiful that, if she had not been crying so hard, she might have gasped with pleasure; but the tears had got possession of her, and even the surprise of finding somebody in the wood besides herself could not stop them.

The foreground of the picture was green turf and a wonderful flush of wood violets, and lying in the violets, a few feet from the edge of the pool, was a naked lady. She had evidently been bathing, for her white limbs were still sleek with the water, and as it was warm in the heart of the wood—as warm as Summer—she had not put on her clothes. She lay with her rosy hands and feet deep in the exquisite mauve-blue flowers, and the curve of her white hip rose dazzling above them. Diana had not seen many beautiful women in her short life, and until then her mother had seemed to her the prettiest. But the face of the girl lying in the grass was so lovely that even tears could not disfigure it to her sight. She shook them out of the baby-blue of her eyes, and stumbled towards the wonderful lady as if drawn by a magnet.

"Di's hurted—her—hand—Di's hurted—all over!" she said as well as she could for the sobs.

The lady sat up so quickly and gracefully that it was like some fawn rising from its couch, but she kept her half recumbent position amongst the violets to be nearer the child's height. Her hair fell back from her face as she did so like heaps of loose gold, and her wide-opened eyes looked earnestly into Diana's blurred ones.

"Olympus!" she said in a low voice. "She can see!"

They looked earnestly at each other for a few moments, the feminine in its prime and the feminine in embryo. Then the lady held out both her hands to the child, who

saw their exquisite palms like the pink of a shell and hesitated to touch them with her tiny earth-soiled fingers.

"Come nearer to me, little maid!" said the lady, in a low wooing voice. "Tell me what your name is, and how you came here?"

"I'se Diana, and I'se dirty!" said the baby with the repugnance of a carefully nurtured child accustomed to cleanliness. But the lady laughed, and it sounded like sweet bells in the wood, which caught it like an echo.

"You are my god-child then. My name also is Diana—to some. But, poor child! how you have been crying! Surely not for a mere tumble?"

She seemed scornful of tumbles, and of mere pain, this heroic young lady with the broad brows beneath the sweep of her hair and eyes as deep and clear as the water of the pool. Little Diana felt the need of justifying herself.

"I'se got a forn!" she said, and held out her chubby hand where the recent falls in the mossy wood had made the one small black mark very mixed with others.

But the Lady Diana saw it in an instant with those piercing eyes, and taking the small hand firmly in her own, pressed the inflamed finger so that the thorn gushed out with a drop of blood.

Diana the baby did not cry this time, though she gasped a little and her eyes grew very large with the sight of the blood.

"That's a brave little maid—my true god-child!" said the lady as if well pleased. "And as to the dirt, we will soon get rid of that. You shall have a bath in my beautiful pool." She lifted something to her lips that the child had not noticed lying in the grass—a silver hunting horn that caught the light and distracted the baby from her own hurt. How true and clear its note rang, silver also

and as sweet as music! It was answered after a minute by the sound of running feet, the flutter of light robes, and in an instant the glade was full of young girls, dressed in white that fell loose to the knee and left their legs bare though their feet were sandalled. All the faces were fair, but none was as perfect as the lady's by the pool. She held up her hand to stop their rush and their exclamations of surprise.

"Callisto—Lotis—Thoe—come gently, girls—look at this mortal child. She can see, yes, and hear!"

There was a momentary pause and flutter, like the settling of doves, and then the exquisite laughing group closed round the two Dianas, fair faces bending down to the baby in a kind of devotion—ah! and she the lady called Callisto with the look of motherhood in her eyes.

"A little maid!—a baby girl! Who is she? How did it happen? A miracle!—But she has been crying, poor child, until her face is all swollen and she is nearly blind!" A hundred white arms seemed to fold round the baby, and their hands to caress her. She snuggled instinctively to a warm bosom, and it was Callisto's."

"She has lost herself in the wood, I think, and tripped and fallen many times. And there was a thorn in her finger which drew blood," said the Lady Diana. "But, little maid, was this all the trouble? What made you cry so bitterly?"

Then Diana the baby looked back to her original cause of grief, and her face puckered again with fear and anger.

"Naughty, ugly boy!" she said, going straight to the core of the matter as only a child could do. "Di's finger hurted her and she looked for Mummy, and Mummy and Mage' Jack was in the garden house and Mage' Jack was eatin' her with kisses, and Di was afraid!" She stopped breathless, but the attentive faces of her

listeners drew her on. "Then Di saw naughty boy making fun of them—naughty, ugly boy—wiv' red hair!"

"What boy was it?" asked one of the girls coaxingly. "Someone Baby knows?"

"Di never saw him before—never wants to see him again. He *hurt* Di!" She struggled for expression, only the elements of feeling making her incoherent.

Suddenly the Lady Diana sprang to her feet, and ah, how beautiful she was in all the glowing radiance of her white body! "This child can *see*!" she said again. "Do you not understand? She saw *him*—the accursed boy, and knew him cruel and obscene. Her mother and this lover of hers knew nothing of the Presence they invoked, but the child saw, and feared."

Her voice was so noble and indignant that little Diana lifted her baby eyes in wonder. And then suddenly the lady smiled, and all the anger was gone from her face in an instant.

"Never heed him, my god-child!" she said. "The naughty, ugly boy, indeed! (That you should know him ugly, true daughter of my heart!) Will you be one of my maids, little Diana? Come here to me, and take this kiss upon your forehead—and so I seal you to me and give you my protection from the evil that shall never come near you!"

She knelt down, and taking the child in her arms pressed her lips closely to the smooth brows above the innocent blue eyes. But as she did so a great beam of light like a sword struck through the branching trees as if it would have cleft them apart. One of the girls shrieked, and Diana the child gave an answering cry, for the flash of sunlight might have been forked lightning it was so blazing; but the Lady Diana flung back her head in triumph.

"Too late, my brother!" she exclaimed. "She is mine!—Who was it shrieked? *You*, Clytie?"

The girl who had so betrayed her fear—or was it pain?—was covering her face with trembling hands, and dropped to her knees at the lady's feet. "Will not even contempt and betrayal make you wise," said a scornful voice above her bowed head, "that the sight of your lover's sword opens the wound in your heart afresh? He is so much thrall to Leocothoe that he has no longer any thought for you. I know him better than you, poor fool, for we fed at one breast, and grew together on Delos. At four years old he built an altar to himself with the horns of goats that I had killed for him, and he is still the supreme egoist though my closest kin."—Then with that swift change of voice and manner she turned tenderly to the child:

"See, little maid, the moon is always your friend and will do you no harm; but go not overmuch in the broad noon, for the sun approves not of my chastity. Remember what I say, though you do not understand it now."

The girl Clytie had slipped away into the shade of the trees, as one shamed; but the lady called the other girls and pointed laughingly to little Diana's muddy frock and knees. "Come, some of you, undress her and bathe her in the pool, and let us teach her to love the pure water, and to swim, and all clean sports."

Then followed an hour that the Baby Diana never forgot through all her after life. The girls threw their white robes aside and took off her own soiled clothes, and with cries of delight and laughter lifted her in their arms like a queen and carried her into the cool sparkling pool. They splashed it over each other and dived and swam, and the child shrieked with ecstasy and felt no fear. Diana herself took her namesake on her breast and floated with her, and showed her how the kindly limpid water should bear

her up; and there were games and gambols and glorious sport until she was so tired that she fell asleep. And in her sleep it seemed to her that gentle hands dried and dressed her again and carried her somewhere, rocking her to deeper sleep. For when she woke she was lying in the meadow just beyond her father's garden and lands, and voices were calling her in all directions—Mummy and Nurse and the other servants—

But the ladies of the pool were gone.

* * * * *

There was nothing unusual about Diana as she grew up unless it were her indifference to admiration and a lack of feminine arts to gain it. Nevertheless she was admired.

"She is the sporting type of girl," said her mother. "The only human weakness about her is the care she takes of her complexion—she is horribly afraid of sunburn or sunstroke! I can't say she appeals to me—I suppose I am ultra-feminine." And considering the numerous successors to Major "Jack" O'Reilley, she may have been justified in her self-conceit.

But Diana's father adored her.—"She's a good sportswoman," he said. "You let her alone, Ethel—she'd rather be up in the dark and ride to hounds than dance half naked all night at one of your beastly clubs. And so she shall. She shall do as she likes."

"She'll never marry!" said Lady Ethel contemptuously. "She drives the men away."

"She'll marry fast enough when she wants to," said Squire Thurston with a chuckle. "Why, she's the best-looking girl in the South of England! And she hasn't driven Sarony away."

"Sarony wants her because he can't get her," said Diana's mother, and to a certain extent it was true. Lord

Sarony had been so hunted in his turn, both secretly and openly, by other women, that Diana's placid indifference to him was in itself an attraction. He had admired her when she was fifteen, and had then predicted that she would "wipe the floor" with other women when she was twenty. But his assured attentions had met with no success beyond some annoyance to the object of them. She was much more interested in other girls' affairs than in her own, though her attitude was one of a grave and immense pity, as for those mentally afflicted, when she saw her friends falling in love. It was a process that took place with them two or three times a year, in her experience; sometimes too trivial for anything but ridicule, sometimes nearly grave enough for tears. On one occasion, indeed, it really caused her tears, though she was only a schoolgirl.

She had never said anything about the day when she ran a thorn into her finger at four years old, and saw her mother and Major O'Reilley in the garden house. The family soon after left the country and went to live in London, with only occasional visits to Squire Thurston's landed property. When they were there, however, the child Diana developed a marked propensity to stray, generally into the forbidden wood, and no punishment however severe could stop her. It was partly in consequence of this, and her rebellion to authority, that she was sent to school, and there, like other girls, she had one particular friend, a year or so older than herself. Viola Graham was much quicker at book-learning than Diana, and much slower at games. Nevertheless they were inseparable until the day when Viola betrayed her girl love for a man. At first Diana could not believe that she must take a second place—she was jealous and furious and bitterly hurt, and the quarrel that followed estranged the two girls for a time. But she discovered by and bye that her own grief and sense of desertion was being revenged

on Viola, who had to suffer in her turn to an extent that excelled Diana's.

"Geordie's going away—and he doesn't care for me any more!"—that was the burden of it when Diana asked what the matter was, for old sake's sake.

"Going out to India—five years on a foreign station!"

"Well, he can't help that. You knew he must go."

"Yes, but I thought we should be the same as engaged. Not openly—we're too young—but writing to each other until he comes back, and all that."

"And won't you?"

"He doesn't want to. He's flirting with a married woman—heaps older than he is. Oh, I hate her!—"

There was no doubt about the hate, even if there had been some in Diana's mind about the love. She looked at Viola's eyes and they made her tremble. They were like a wild animal's, dangerous with pain. (Why did she suddenly think about the first time she went to the bathing pool in the wood, the girl called Clytie and her stricken face?)

"How can you want him if he treats you like that?" she said wonderingly.

"Ah! you don't understand. You've never loved anybody, Di. Nothing they do makes any difference. I go on wanting—and wanting—and wanting. It eats into me like fire."

And indeed she looked consumed as if with some inward heat. A sickly thing, no doubt, this plant of love at seventeen; but if it were so terrible what would mature passion be?

Diana did not answer her friend because her own eyes were suddenly and startlingly distracted even from the new face that Viola wore. The room where they happened to be was on the ground floor, a lesser schoolroom in which the older girls attended special classes. It being unoccupied at the time had made it the background to

a confidence that should not have been given in class time, and which was certainly incongruously sandwiched between trigonometry and French classics. The windows of the room were open to admit the soft summer air, but the girls were on the further side of it nearest to the door. Looking in at them, through an open window, Diana saw the same malicious face that had frightened her as a child. She knew him in an instant though he was a youth now rather than a boy, and knew too who he was. The face with its perfection of feature was none the less hideous to her, because she saw the cruelty in it as through a fine mask, and the curved lips and half-closed blue eyes were nothing but a red gash and the gloating gaze of some soulless devil. He was only a little more coarse and cruel and undeveloped in mind than he had been as a child, but his adolescence was infernal. It was a sin to call him bestial, for the beasts were nobler, even in their instincts. She stood looking at him as if paralysed, but he did not see her. All his faculties were concentrated on Viola, whose immature anguish was giving him an undisguised enjoyment. His mouth widened to a smile, and the pink tip of his tongue licked his lips in a suggestion of physical pleasure and pitiless mockery. It seemed that he would never remove that evil leer from the window, and that Viola's miserable sobbing would never cease, until Diana was aware that in a few more seconds she would give a hoarse scream to break the tension of the moment.

Then the leisurely tread of one of the class-mistresses came along the corridor outside, and a hand touched the door. The youth at the window ducked, still grinning, and was gone; and Viola checked her crying with an effort that seemed to wrench the heart out of her body. It was Diana who turned to meet the class-mistress, making some excuse for their presence there, but what she had

said she never knew. The horror in her mind was for the revelation that she could see what Viola could not see, and that, if Viola had seen, it would have been the glorified face of a god whom she would have worshipped.

* * * * *

Lord Sarony came down from Oxford with the reputation of a young man more than a little perverse. He wanted the impossible, and pursued the unattainable. His cult was the revival of the Ancient Civilisations, more particularly of Greece, and the worship of her doubtful ideals. He held séances, and had presided at strange rites in his rooms at the House. (By which he meant Christchurch College and not the House of Lords.) If he had not been Lord Sarony perhaps he might have been sent down before; but as it was he just scraped through on the near side of rustication, and carried his reputation into a side of London life where it had more scope.

Why he adored Diana Thurston remained an incongruous mystery. Her mother had said that it must be because he could not get her; and added that he was so adorable he could get any other girl he wanted or woman either. Diana had frowned him down when she was a little girl, snubbed him as a big one, and frankly refused him as a "flapper." He came again and yet again, as a wasp comes to the wine until he is drowned or killed in some more unpleasant way. He grew at last so much in earnest that even his pose dropped from him, and he fretted himself into feverish desires; and still Diana steadily declined to see any advantage in becoming Lady Sarony, for the ridiculous reason that she was not in love with him.

"Or anybody!" he said bitterly. "I believe they made you without a heart. I should like to see you in love, Di, even though it was not with me—I should like to see you suffer as you have made me suffer."

"Yes, it always seems to make men cruel," said Diana simply.

"I'm not cruel, I'm mad, and you have made me so."

He flung away from her, like a pettish child, and then a taunt over his shoulder as he left her:

"I'll bring you a lover some day to whom even you shall listen. He will melt the ice in your veins and you shall burn as I am burning now!"

But she was so relieved to be rid of him that she did not heed, and indeed his threats were as the ring of empty glass to her. He had gone abroad, she heard. Somebody had seen him in Paris. With another woman? She did not care. But it was not another woman. With the most beautiful young man—a friend of his at college. They were inseparable, and the women who had spoilt Sarony ran yet more wild about his friend. He was—he really was—the most enchanting fellow in the world. No older than Sarony, as well-born (one of the Loves of Dorset, a known family), English of course, though the same had been said of him in every country where they travelled, for he spoke languages like a native; as handsome as Adonis. Even Sarony wrote of him to Di, as if all rancour were dead between them with this new obsession. "You must meet Dan—he is a darling fellow. Your mother has asked us down. Be kind to him, for my sake—but you will like him for his own. You can't help it."

Diana was in the country at the time, at the old house in which she had spent her childhood. She was very happy, with an unexplained happiness that seemed to find an outlet in the field sports she cared most for. That her mother had filled the house with a party was, if anything, a drawback, but she did not concern herself overmuch with those who did not interest her.

It was early Autumn, and she had been out all day with

the guns, such liberty being assured her by her father. Both he and she had been excused from the tedious dinner, but for courtesy's sake the girl dressed and came down to the drawing-room later to satisfy her mother, knowing that several fresh guests had arrived that day. It had been intensely hot for September, and Diana was glad that the sun had set. She was never quite happy at broad noon on a hot day when the rays struck down on her like a sword. With the coming of night and cooler airs she revived like the flowers in the garden beds drooping and longing for rain—all save the sunflower, which still stared devotedly towards the west. It was the time of sunflowers, and they were out in all their glory; but Diana had little liking for them.

She had never liked her mother's drawing-room with its erotic pictures and sensuous furnishings either; but to-night there was something about it that made her long to flee and not to mingle with the men and women gathered there after dinner. The room was too full of rich scents, too rosy with subdued light, too throbbing with music from the extraphone—the latest and most expensive production in sound records. As Diana entered an exquisite tenor voice was singing, and the fact that it was only a record—bodiless music conjured up by the magic of science—affected her no less than seeing and hearing the actual singer would have done.

"For Love has no abiding,
    But dies before the kiss.
So hath it been, so be it—
For who shall live and flee it?
But look that no man see it
    Or hear it unaware!
Lest all who love and choose him
See Love, and so refuse him;
For all who find him lose him,
    But all have found him fair,"

sang the voice, insistent, intangible.

Diana felt faint and weak beyond her own experience.

She longed intensely for fresh air and the wholesome night, and moved instinctively towards the long windows which were left open to the garden. She felt as if she were battling with an evil power which might overwhelm her at any moment. As she crossed the room she was vaguely aware of Lord Sarony and another young man whom she passed without attention; but Sarony followed her to a seat in the window where she sat down, leaning out to the cooler air. There was a white crescent of a moon coming up above the trees, and she drew a breath of relief at sight of the silver curve. Then she heard Sarony saying, "I must introduce you to her—Di, this is my pal, Dan Love," and found that both he and his companion had reached her side.

She looked at Sarony first, and found him changed. There was something in his face that shocked her a little, though she could not tell what it was. And having presented his friend he instantly turned away and absorbed himself with other girls as if ashamed or afraid. She pondered. Then she turned to the friend he had called Dan and who had paused beside her and not moved.

She had so often heard this young man described with loud plaudits that his physical appearance should have been known to her already. Hair like warm red gold, eyes so intensely blue that their curled lashes could hardly steal the colour, a skin as fine as a woman's and ruddy as a man's, features too beautiful to be criticised—the other men and women in the room saw all this, and worshipped the physical perfection.

But what Diana saw was the sneering lips and the leering eyes of the boy behind the garden house and the youth at the schoolroom window. His hair was red to her sight without its gold, his eyes as heartless as they were deeply coloured. She knew him; but he did not

know her. He had never consciously seen her until now, for each time they had met he had been concerned with his victim—not with her.

His proximity was so overpowering that she rose from her seat instinctively, and stepped through the open window into the outside world. She did not invite him to follow her or make any excuse for her lack of manners, though her action in the circumstances demanded some conventional speech. She was so horribly afraid that when she saw him step through the window also she wanted to shriek and fly, but her limbs seemed paralysed. There was something in his eyes that affected her as no man's eyes had ever done, and her own vision was blurred while her ears heard less clearly the laughter and voices in the room she had left. Those men and women in there appeared gracious and sympathetic, and in some strange way weakened her will. She was under a spell, the same spell that swayed the people in the drawing-room. She braced her tired limbs to quivering strength to meet the wavering of her numbed brain, but, as her enemy drew nearer to her, her senses became more and more confused, as though it were his personality that enveloped her with the richness of scent and colour it diffused. He said something to her—she never knew what—but his voice stole into her mind like a narcotic and made her long for sensuous sleep. She turned her blinded face to the clean moonlight on the woods in the distance, and heard, far off, the sound of a silver horn.

"Oh listen! they are hunting to-night," she said breathlessly, and the faint baying of hounds followed her words.

Her companion's face flushed as if someone had struck him with an open hand—she saw the mark on his forehead under the ripple of reddish gold hair. With a motion

like a challenge she flung herself away from him, breathing hard as if she had been running; and as one who accepts the gage he followed her, pressing upon her—but she was no longer afraid, even though his face was red as sunrise with anger.

"You can *hear*!" he stammered hoarsely, and there was no subtle allurement now in his voice. "Why do you look at me like that? Your eyes were warm a minute since and now they are as cold and blue as ice. You are like no other girl—why is it?"

"I know you, and who you are!" she gasped.

"You *know*? You can *see*?"

He bent a little closer to her and his face was horrible again. "There is a kiss upon your forehead," he hissed. "Diana's kiss. You are one of her votaries—her nymphs?"

"I am her maid since I was a very little child."

"Ah, too young to know—stolen from delight! Give me your hand and let me lead you back—back to the roses and the music and the ecstasy of life. It is not Sarony who woos you now—it is I, Love himself. All pretences are down between us, for you know me, and I am stronger than you."

He was close upon her, the breath and heat of him encircling her like flame. If those venomous ripe lips touched her own she felt that she was lost, and once more she saw them laugh, greedily, in anticipation. No vampire could have been more keen to suck her life-blood than that red mouth was to drain her chastity. "Who shall save you?" he mocked.

"Diana!"

The name came so suddenly that it was as if a shaft of cold light struck in between them, just as years ago a quiver from the sun had sought to divide the baby Diana from her dedication to the goddess. With the word a

change came over the mortal vision of the young man whose virility threatened the girl. He was no longer mortal, but his transformation was like unto a baptism of fire. She saw him for one instant with his beauty distorted, the eyes blind with agony, the brow damp with sweat, even the red lips livid; but, twisted with such pain as seemed inhuman, his face was yet the face that Psyche saw before he passed from her. For it was not Psyche who lost the nameless thing that men have misnamed Love; but Love himself who lost the awakening soul.

The vision before Diana's eyes burned like a twisted flame before it flickered out, leaving the remembrance of a tortured face, and the clear pure moonlight.

IV

THE TEN TALENTS

Michael Farley was born an engineer. He had also the misfortune to be born in the 'eighties when the younger generation was not so seriously considered as in the present day. As a matter of fact Michael was not considered at all so far as his future was concerned, and nobody asked him What he would like To Be, or noticed that he had any particular bent. His mother did remark that he was the messiest boy she had ever had to do with, and always playing with taps and building things in the garden; but she never connected it with the desire to harness the powers of the elements, which got into his hands and got him into trouble.

At school he was a quiet boy who learned some things very easily and others not at all. He liked mathematics because they proved themselves, and he disliked history and geography because they were driven into him with blows. But on the whole he got on better than his younger brother, Mark, who was always in hot water and threatened to run away and go to sea from the time he sat on the lowest form in the Wyeminster Grammar School.

The boys' father was an auctioneer and estate agent in an old-fashioned county town which had so many of the craft that they almost snatched the bread out of each other's mouths to live at all. Few new houses were built in Wyeminster, and the town did not expand like those with some industry as an incentive to their existence. There was a small market every Thursday and a large one once a month; but these, and the Minster, were the

only reasons why Wyeminster was a town and not a village. The Minster was more generally called St. Bridget's and was probably the only thing dear to Michael's heart for artistic reasons. He sang in the choir, and the noble proportions of the arches and the old stained glass windows gave him a satisfaction he could not have explained, even while he knew that the ground damp and the lighting were all wrong and could have been righted so easily. Across the chancel, but facing the reading desk, was Sir Richard Mead's pew, and its owner's fine head rising above others when the congregation rose. Michael heard Sir Richard once expostulating with the Canon, the Rev. Charles Lamb, about the drawbacks of the Minster, and had seen the Canon raise his hands in exculpation.

"What are we to do, Sir Richard? We want funds for the restoration as it is!"

"We want an engineer for the sanitation as it isn't!" retorted the Squire.

Michael longed to tell him of the little ground plan he had made of the Minster, and the probable course of the spring which the Sexton said rose in the crypt; and how he had gone with Ham Ailes the miller to the old water-mill that was not a stone's throw away across the Close and might be used as a power-station for electricity—he was sure of it. But he was only fourteen and too shy to thrust himself upon the great man of the district, though Sir Richard always looked kind and was said to encourage every crank with a theory. He had sent his cowman's son to the Technical College at S——, because the lad had a taste for drawing, and had encouraged him to become an architect, to the extreme disapproval of Wyeminster, which was nothing if not conservative.

It was an accepted fact in Michael's family that he was to go into his father's office as soon as he left school,

and learn the same business. He had not the least interest in or facility for such work, but he would save his father the expense of a clerk, and he could write letters and answer questions in the little office in Wyeminster as well as any other youth, or so it was supposed. Michael himself had raised no objection to the arrangement, beyond an inward revolt, until he was between fifteen and sixteen and nearing his last term, when he took the family by surprise by saying that he disliked office work and would rather do something that kept him in the open air.

"But what do you want to do?" asked Henry Farley blankly, with vague ideas of farming rising before his disapproving vision.

"I should like to be an engineer."

"What, go into a garage?"

"No, father, not a mechanic—a civil engineer, the chap who makes the railway bridges and the docks."

"But you've no training for it!"

"I thought perhaps I could go to the Technical College at S——," faltered the boy, getting rather red. Even to himself the extravagance of the proposal sounded monstrous now that it was put into words. His mother, who was present at the consultation he had unwittingly called, snorted and threw up her head.

"And who's to pay the fees?"

"If father could manage it for me I'd be able to pay him back by and bye better than going into the Agency business. You know you've always said it was crowded out here, and no prospect for a man to make his way."

"Your father's done enough and more giving you a good education and keeping you at school so long," retorted Mrs. Farley hotly. She had been so long harassed by the want of money, that Michael's request touched her in a sore spot. Michael felt his own ingratitude in asking more,

but the desire in him was too strong to be given up without a last stand.

"Other fellows have been sent to the College with less reason than mine," he muttered. "Sir Richard sent old Lunsden's boy just to learn drawing when he'd only been to the County School. I've learned a lot that would be useful to me—I know I have. I only want to get a chance."

"You're not the son of Sir Richard's cowman," said his mother pertinently. "Or of anyone's cowman. We're a cut above that, I hope. D'you think Sir Richard would come down handsome for *you*? Why should he? We've never asked for charity and never need. If you help your father as he's helped you that's all that's asked of you, Mike, and you ought to be thankful to do it, too!"

Michael looked at his father in preference to the indignant woman, to see if there were more sympathy or understanding in him. But though Farley was perplexed and a good deal startled he was no more helpful than his wife.

"I can't afford to pay for another school for you, my boy," he said honestly. "I'm sorry this has got into your head. I'd no idea you were thinking of it. But boys always want to be something different to what's ready to their hands—I did myself. You'll settle down once you begin to work; and if you're really keen on the engineering you can take the classes at the Institute, and see how you get on. They are free to the boys of your school—but I don't think many take advantage of them!"

To his wife he said privately that they need not worry the boy—he was no different to other lads, and the extra work in the evenings after he was free from the routine of the day would soon bring him to his senses. The other youths in the town had their diversions and Michael was

likely to join them rather than to go to the Institute. "Mike was always the steadier of our boys," he reminded her. "I shall have much more trouble when I take Mark into the business too!"

So the father and mother thought that it was settled; but the son went out into the meadows round Wyeminster, where he had played with the bridges and the river as a child, and felt the power of Nature set against his own and the instinct to wrestle with her and prove his mastery—and he threw himself down on the banks and cried for his heart's desire. Nobody knew of that hour unless it were Canon Lamb, to whom Michael went in one last desperate interview before he gave up hope. He knew the Canon because of his connection with the Minster, and the cleric was the only man with any standing or influence in Wyeminster whom he did know.

Canon Lamb received him with great kindness in a beautiful room in his old house in the Close, and talked to him in equally beautiful language about the opportunity before him—not of his father's office, nor of his own desire to be an engineer, but of the chance to put his wishes on one side and sacrifice them to the simple Duty so plainly put before him.

"My dear lad, I wish I could make you see the wonderful thing that is happening to you—the great opening that God is giving you to serve Him in this self-denial. I feel sure you will not fail. I have such confidence in you that I know you will not. It is the little dull efforts of every day whereby we serve Him best—not by some splashy deed that gets us applause from our neighbours. Nobody may realise your sacrifice—but He will. I know how hard it is," said the Canon, looking round complacently at his harmonious surroundings; "I have had to resign many ambitions in silence, and to accept what He has sent me.

But you have kind parents and a good home, and the knowledge that you are pleasing them as well as God will—it must—sweeten the daily drudgery."

Michael had a mad irreverent feeling for one moment that the Canon had not done so badly out of the Almighty, whatever private ambitions he had given up. The living was a good one, and the incumbent of St. Bridget's had a very comfortable berth in Wyeminster. But the rebel thought was smothered in the habit of reverence and a little awe of the Canon's position, and he only looked at the good man with an impenetrable face while the iron entered into his soul. He had somehow hoped that the Canon would make his cause his own and bring his influence to bear on his father, as Sir Richard had done for the cowman's son. It was not a large hope and it died quietly while the Canon was wondering if he should be late for tea and hoping that Michael would go. He had given up half an hour of his valuable time in preaching him an extra sermon that was not included in his week's work, but as he said to himself, "God forbid that I should withhold a helping hand to the lad at the outset of his life! I have never refused myself to my flock, and I never will!"

Michael had been a year in his father's business when Mark left school, and it was his turn to be promoted to an office stool and the resignation of his own particular plans for his future. It was thought that he would make the better auctioneer of the two, and he was to be trained to this part of the business. But Mark never did become either an auctioneer or estate agent, because he raised the same objections that Michael had done and raised them in a louder key. He had always said that he would go to sea, and when the necessary help was denied him he fulfilled his threat of running away. It is true he did not

get to sea. He was found some weeks later on a barge that worked on the canal some twenty miles from Wyeminster, to which he had apprenticed himself and—incidentally—learned some surprisingly bad language. It was the nearest he could get to being afloat, and had meant hardships and associations that caused his sharp-tongued mother much caustic speech at his expense. She felt the disgrace to her respectability more than her husband, but Mark was sufficiently like herself to "stand up to her" and threaten a worse outbreak when he was brought back to talk it over. They fought the week out like cat and dog, but Mark ran away again and got as far as the docks of the nearest seaport this time, where he vowed he would become a stevedore until he had a chance of going to sea. The end of it was that his father mortgaged the little house they lived in to send the rebellious boy to a training ship, and Mark went abroad at last in disgrace—but Michael could not help feeling in his iron-bound soul that his brother was a finer figure to the family than himself for all his acceptance of duty and self-denial. When his mother said, "I will never forgive Mark!" she always added, "But I suppose the boy's bent was so strong that nothing would have prevented it," and so the rest of them lived more hampered still by the mortgage, which Mark was never likely to repay for the outlay on him.

Michael had attended the evening classes at the Institute without much profit to himself. They were theoretical, and taught him on paper what he wished to learn by practice. The only immediate result to himself was that the work docked him of the diversions and leisure of other youths of his own age, as his father had foreseen, and made him a dull fellow as he plodded on. Henry Farley died when Michael was still in his early twenties, and left him the mortgage and very little besides save the task of sup-

porting his mother. When he was on his death-bed the elder Farley confided to his son that he had always wanted to write verse, and that as a young man he had actually contributed to the "local talent" column of the weekly paper. Michael found the cuttings afterwards in his desk and read them with a mixture of pity and surprise, they were so poor. But he felt a vein of sympathy with his father's thwarted instinct that he never had before. His mother, he knew, had not understood.

Michael had never thought of marriage for himself, he had been too straitened in means; but it came to him without his seeking it. He still sang in the choir at St. Bridget's, his voice having developed to a good baritone, and his connection with the Minster brought him in touch with Millicent Burrows. The Burrows were townspeople, of much the same standing as the Farleys, but with much more to do with Church matters and devoted to Canon Lamb. Millie was a district visitor, a church decorator, and a staunch supporter of all Church functions according to her means. Her father had been a landscape gardener, and he left his widow with enough to starve on in a genteel manner that kept Millie at home to do the housework and made her contributions to the parish a real matter of self-denial. She was not a pretty girl or particularly intelligent; but she had a gentle, dependent manner that made Michael Farley feel more of a man when with her than he had ever done. Beyond walking home with her from the Sunday services he had never paid her any great attention, and had never dreamed of asking her to marry him until the occasion of an Easter service wherein the choir had sung "I know that my Redeemer liveth" with unusual success, and on the homeward way Millie had burst into tears and clung to his arm.

"Oh, it was so beautiful!—I know how silly you must think me—but I have always loved it so since the time when *you* used to take the solo!"

"My voice was no better than Bertie Rawlings'," said Michael awkwardly, wondering what to say to soothe her. "I'm afraid this has upset you."

"I used to think your voice was flying straight up to Heaven when you sang it! You never noticed me in those days, Michael."

"I don't think boys of that age do notice girls."

"When did you first begin to—like me?"

"I don't know—I suppose when I first began to know you."

"Did you like me better as you began to know me more?"

"I suppose so. I never thought about it. You can't like people if you *don't* know them, can you?"

"Ah!—I liked *you*, even when you were a boy and never spoke to me!"

"Did you?" he said stupidly. He felt oddly flattered, and wondered if other girls had liked him without his knowing it? The torpid blood stirred in his veins a little, and he looked at Millie clinging to his arm.

"Why! you're still crying!" he said in dismay. "Do you always cry when you have heard a fine service?"

"It isn't the service—it's you!" she gasped between her sobs, and he saw that her face was unusually flushed.

He began to feel a little embarrassed, and to wish that she were not so emotional; but he pressed the hand in his arm to his side with an idea that it was the proper thing to do in the circumstances, and felt her cling to him convulsively. He had never dreamed that Millie Burrows was in love with him, and would have been angry if anyone had suggested it, as much for her sake as his own. But he

supposed that she must be—a little. When they came to the quiet street in which her mother lived he paused again awkwardly at the door and wished that she would let his arm go before it opened. The month was March—Easter was very early that year—and though it was eight o'clock the Spring twilight lingered even in the town. People passing by might see them and think they were engaged, or her mother might come to the door. . . .

"Good night," he said awkwardly.

Milly held out a shaking hand. "Good-bye, dear Michael," she said. "Don't think the worse of me for letting you see how much I care for you. I always have and I always shall do. You don't love anyone else, do you?"

"No,—I've never thought about it—except for a bit of fun when girls and young men get together, you know."

"I'm sure you wouldn't have walked home with me so often if you had been thinking of another girl—from church too! That seems to set it apart somehow, doesn't it? To make it more true and honest. And if a girl really likes a man—as I do you—I think she *ought* to tell him, and not let him make a mistake about her, however difficult it may be. It's for all our lives, isn't it? not as if it were just a little thing that didn't matter."

Michael's embarrassment was becoming bewilderment. He did not quite know how they had come to this pass, or recognise that he was being proposed to,—he only felt that he was not doing all that she wished, and was disappointing her. He stooped suddenly, regardless of passers-by, and kissed her wet face, stammering something about seeing her again;—and then the door opened and she ran in, and he was striding home with a great warmth all over his body.

"Perhaps now," he thought from his starved soul, "I shall

find my mate, and there will be somebody to understand and sympathise with all I have wanted and missed. Even those old dreams of mine might come true if she cared for them also—it is not too late. I can work evenings again, and train for something better than the house agency.

The desire to create, to harness the elements, had not quite died out in him. But he badly wanted someone to believe in his capacity. The sympathy he had fancied in Millie's love-filled eyes nerved him to stand up for his right to her even against his mother's bitter comments. She did not like the Burrows, and she very naturally did not want Michael to marry.

"You haven't made such a success of the business that you can afford to think of supporting a wife on it, I should say!" she remarked acidly. "What have you got to offer her? The mortgage hung round your neck to start with, and no prospect of you paying it off that I can see. You'll do as you like, of course. Men are all selfish. Well, I shan't be here to see, many years."

"I didn't think of marrying for a while, mother," said Michael resentfully.

"Well, she will—unless she's a fool! You mark my words, she'll be giving you wet eyes until it's all settled up. She's that sort. You've been caught, Michael."

Mrs. Farley was right in both of her prognostications, for she took a chill and died in the following winter, and Michael was married soon after—just a year from the Easter service that had decided his fate. Millicent's eyes filled with tears easily, as her mother-in-law had shrewdly predicted, and the suspicion that she was not very happy at home hastened matters for Michael. There was no doubt of her devotion to him, it seemed to leak out of her even with her tears, and she openly longed for the time when they should be always together. The words of the

marriage service seemed to her beautiful—particularly as pronounced by Canon Lamb, who graciously consented to marry them himself—but she added to them serially as if they were to-be-continued-in-our-next.

"Till death us do part is not the end, Mike—it is going on into Eternity. I feel that we shall be loving each other still, in Heaven, or it wouldn't be Heaven to me!"

Michael had not thought much about such things, but when his attention was drawn to them he supposed it would be so. He wondered somewhere in the background of his groping mind if his mother expected to meet his father in the same way, and whether she would nag him in another existence as she had in this? But Mrs. Farley, at least, had not referred to it. Her last thoughts were of the living.

"I should like to have seen Mark again," she said unexpectedly when she was very ill. "It's hard he should be the other side of the world. Mark was always my boy—more like me than his father. He couldn't be content to stay put—must be up and doing. How well he looked when he was last home, in his uniform!——"

Mark's visits had been few and far between, and Michael had not realised that his mother's fancy had been caught by the noise and pictorial effect of his arrivals. He had worked his way through various side-tracks to being mate on a small coastal steamer in Australia, and had come back to England in a sailing ship as cook. At one time he had joined a theatrical company on account of his voice (he could still sing, as well as Michael) and had kept a store in Lourenço Marques. Each experience seemed to have taken something from his refinement and given him a coarser education in life. But he was loud and sanguine and full of a larger life than Wyeminster's, and his mother forgot the trouble he had caused as a boy

and her own angry denouncement of his rebellion to authority. All Michael's patient work and strength of duty had not gained him her heart as his brother's selfish indifference. Michael felt in the bitterness of his soul that it was Mark whose self-will had first laid a burden of debt on them under which he still struggled, but that if he had deserted as Mark had done he would have been a finer figure in his parents' eyes. It was the old story of the Prodigal and the elder brother who stayed at home.

Michael did not find the understanding and complete oneness of ideals in his wife that he had foreshadowed. Millie did indeed listen to him with adoring eyes when he confided his secret hopes and ambitions to her; but she wished that they had been something else. To her, an engineer was a grimy fellow who was not far removed from a sweep while in the workshop, and it was hopeless to explain to her that he wanted to be a builder of bridges, and not a maker of motor cars. This distinction between the work of a civil and a mechanical engineer was the only one he could find to reach her intelligence at all. He did not mean to remain a mechanic, though he would have taken up the mechanical work in preference to the distasteful routine of the house agency; but his modest plan of winding up his father's business and getting work in a garage to start with met with gentle distress from her. He had a rare gift for drawing, which he devoted to hydraulics, and his inventive genius made him hopeful of perfecting a certain improvement in hydraulic jacks. Perhaps in time he might take out a patent and make money by it. But these were dreams for the future. What he wanted was congenial work, and a chance to test his ability. He could make more as a "fitter" than he was doing as a house agent—he was sure of it.

"If I can't build a breakwater I must content myself with a motor car," he said in the first flush of his confidences. "You know it's the small things in a petrol engine that matter. Just some detail that has escaped other fellows, but they always seem to come to me. I'm down at Burton and Hodges' place most evenings, and all Saturday afternoon, and they say I'm better than the experts. I got that new lorry of Brisbane's to carry her loads when they'd almost given her up. It was only an adjustment she wanted." He stopped at sight of his wife's face. She did not understand him at all. And a natural snobbishness made her aware of the social advantage of owning a "business" like the house agency, as against being only a fitter in Burton & Hodges' big works. She did not put it in that way, even to herself. Millicent generally took her stand on a sentimental obligation.

"It seems rather ungrateful—doesn't it, Mike?—to give up the business your father worked hard to make for you, and go into Burton's just because you like it better! You never did so while your mother was alive,—but you don't mind now there's only me to consider. And—and the baby coming too!"

"It's just because of you and the kid that I want to make a change," said Michael drearily. "A man can only do what he can. I was never any good at bluffing people into living where they don't want!"

"A man can do what he *ought*, if he is a Christian," said Millicent gently, taking sanctuary in her Church. Her husband was early learning to keep an exasperated silence when she used her religion as a battering ram to his own convictions.

He did not, however, have to give up the trade he had failed in, against her opposition, because the War came and decided the question for him. He joined up at the

very beginning, and as it was a matter of conscience his wife could not protest. She was for once met with her own weapons, and shifted her ground to that of the martyr's giving all for her country. The business, such as remained of it, was taken over by the largest firm in the town, whose partners were elderly men more thriving and more unscrupulous than Michael Farley, with a vague arrangement about compensation on certain assets, that never formulated. Michael had not been a volunteer soldier, and had no training. He was absorbed into the local corps as a private, and Millicent was full of a sense of injury because a grocer's assistant in Wyeminster was made sergeant at once, with an immediate prospect of a commission. The grocer had been an enthusiastic Territorial and gone into Camp each summer; he held, indeed, the rank of sergeant already when the Territorials were mobilised. But that did not seem a reason to Millicent to promote him over Michael's head, since Michael had had the better education, and was the social superior of the grocer. She felt herself humiliated by her husband's rank as well as tortured by anxiety for him when he was sent to France; but as far as material advantage went she somehow found herself better off on his pay and allowances than she had been before.

Michael's experience of the War lasted one year, and then he was sent back to England for the third time, and dismissed as unfit for further service. He had not lost a limb, for which he thanked God in one of the few prayers he ever uttered, but he had been wounded and battered almost out of the shell of a man, and he had learned a larger life and gained an experience of which he never spoke. His wife received him as a direct proof of petitions (her own) granted by Heaven, and would have suggested a special service of thanksgiving at the Minster, but that

her old idol, Canon Lamb, was dead. She seemed to feel his loss almost as much as she might have done her husband, and never spoke of him without her ready tears; but she told Michael regretfully that his successor was a very different type of man—not like the dear old Canon,—a good Churchman no doubt, but too revolutionary in his ideas, for her.

"People don't like his sermons!" she said almost in a whisper, as if a little awed at her own daring. "They say he fosters this modern spirit of independence in young people. Well, we shall see!"

Michael's second child was born in the third year of the War, and was a boy. The first had been a girl. His torpid acceptance of life was roused for a time on behalf of his children to determine that they should not be the slaves of circumstances as he had been, and that he would give them a chance to shape their own future if it could be contrived for them. The girl was a healthy child, who showed neither precocity nor individual tastes, and toddled in her mother's footsteps with apparent content. The boy was weakly, and had the disadvantage of his father's ill-health from the time when his mother was bearing him; but he wailed his way through every childish ailment to the stage when he could show preference for one sort of play over another; and his father watched him—only to discover that little Harry's favourite game was to keep shop. Trade of any kind appeared to be his instinct, and he cared less for country walks than to lag along the streets in the town, staring at the wares in the windows and accompanying his mother when she marketed.

Michael had gone back to the firm that had taken over his own small connection, as a clerk, since his business was gone and he had no capital to start afresh. He had

suffered internal injuries in the War that would prevent his going into a garage now, since he could do no heavy work, and he had learned nothing but book-keeping and the routine of estate agency. The firm that took him on prided itself on giving employment to an ex-service man, and was approved by Wyeminster; and Millicent's respectability was satisfied, though she grumbled at the reduced pay and the little that the country had done for her darling husband, who had been sacrificed to his patriotism. Millicent had grown delicate since the children had come, and was inclined to be fretful about herself, and to talk of the time when she would be gone, and her husband and children would miss her.

"I shall never recover from that awful year you were in France, Mike," she said. "Ah! the War has killed almost as many mothers as fathers. But if you had died I should have died too, and then the little ones would have been left. Sometimes I used to think that it would be better and happier for us to be at rest and safe in Heaven, the suspense was so dreadful! I really did. But dear old Canon Lamb (tears) showed me how wrong I was. He said we must *wait* for Heaven, and *earn* it. But when I am feeling ill and tired I sometimes think how beautiful it will be when we are all there together some day—you and me, and mother and father, and *your* people too,—and poor Mark!"

Mark had died in the last year of the War, his ship having been torpedoed in the south seas by a German raider. His addition to the family party was the only hesitancy that Millicent showed, for Mark's occasional home-comings had been like those of a domesticated volcano. But she swallowed him bravely in her desire to make Michael feel that Heaven was not to be reserved for the Burrows to the exclusion of any of his own family. Her husband was,

as usual, silent, which she took for acquiescence. She was still devoted to him, like some clinging vine that strangles the life of the tree it creeps over, and had no trouble now with his disconcerting love of mechanical powers and of adapting them to man's service. The only sign he ever betrayed to his wife of such a latent talent was in the toys he designed and made for his children—wonderful little mills, and wells with pumps, and bridges that took to pieces and could be rebuilt. They all worked, until Harry broke them by his clumsiness or Annie by her rougher handling.

A year or so after the War there was an exhibition of Arts and Crafts in Wyeminster, and a prize of ten guineas for the best article in the show, whether large or small, useful or artistic. Michael Farley sent in an ingenious toy water-wheel he had laboured over for the pleasure of doing it rather than for any hope of reward. Perhaps the wheel was suggested to him by the old water-mill he had watched so often as a boy; but it revolved the reverse way, and the cups on the chain lifted the water by vacuum instead of the old wooden boxes. Much the same thing is used now on deep-water wells, and called a water elevator, but Michael's toy was hardly less complete than these. It was only necessary to fill the little tank at the bottom of the well, and then to start the pump, and the revolving cups brought up the water as by a miracle and filled the bucket beneath the well spout. Millicent had regarded the toy with little favour, as too elaborate for children and likely to make a mess with the water, and Michael himself had not expected to meet with more recognition than his wife's from the judges at the exhibition, though one of them was Sir Richard Mead, now an elderly man, but no less enthusiastic in discovering talent. No one was so surprised as Michael to find that he was the prize-winner,

and when he was called up to be congratulated he looked almost bewildered by the notice he received.

"I had no idea we had such inventive talent amongst us, Mr. Farley." The Squire's keen eyes rested on Michael with an expression of some curiosity, almost of regret, hearty though his manner was. "I have always known of your firm, of course, but I think you have joined Anderson & Anderson since the War?"

"My own business went with the War, Sir Richard," said Michael, without bitterness but with a resignation that was worse. "Anderson's were very generous in finding me a place in their office."

"You didn't think of any other work? I hope I do not seem impertinent, Mr. Farley, but with an ingenuity like this you surely might have turned it to good account!"

"I wanted to be an engineer when I was a boy," said Michael slowly, as if that old dream came back to him with difficulty. "And I suppose the trick of it is in me still, somehow. But it never had a chance. What might have been a man's work becomes a child's toy, that's all."

"I wish I had known of it! I wish you had come to me!" said Sir Richard Mead impulsively.

"If I had had the courage years ago, Sir Richard,—but I was a boy when I went into my father's business. It's too late now."

"A pity—a grave pity." The Squire spoke almost to himself, handling Michael's toy invention as if the nicety of adjustment appealed to him. "And you never design for this sort of water power?"

"Not now,—though I used to study hydraulics. The only thing that has interested me of late years is the flying machine. I have a theory for controlling a stalled aeroplane—but I am not the practical man because I

have never had an opportunity to experiment. I can put it on paper as a diagram, but I have no model."

"You must come and see me, and we must have a talk about this," said Sir Richard as they shook hands. And as he walked away with another of the judges he added, "I very much fear, Sartoris, that there has been a loss to science there. That unassuming fellow has something closely allied to genius, unless I am much mistaken."

"I was very much struck with his water-wheel myself."

"It's the attention to detail—the patience that must have gone to the thing. Did you hear what he said? 'What might have been a man's work is only a child's toy!' Tragic, that."

"I wonder if his design to control stalling is any good?" Colonel Sartoris speculated. "I'm interested in aeroplanes."

Michael had been working at this theory for some years, ever since he had met men in the War who had let light in on his creative brain. It was his secret, and even Millicent had not known what he was "messing over" in the little cold shed in the garden, unless it were more toys for the children. She prided herself on knowing her husband's mind, and was jealous of that unexplored region in his brain to which her own could not penetrate, but Michael had never breathed a word of being interested in aviation and had not made aeroplanes for Harry to break, though he had made almost every other sort of mechanical model. It came upon her with the force of a bolt from the blue when she heard from his own lips, some months later, that he had been to see Sir Richard Mead at his own request, with a diagram of an aircraft engine, and that the Squire had approved his drawings and advised him also to patent a new chemical formula for cooling radiators. Michael's face was flushed, and his eyes had

more expression in them than she had seen since the days before their marriage when she had vainly loved and longed for him. He seemed to have dropped back twenty years and to be a young man. But his wife's face was blank.

"And you never told me, Michael! You must have been working at this for years."

"I did not think anything could come of it. I only worked for love of the thing. But if it were just the control in falling that the flying men are looking for, as Sir Richard thinks, it might mean success for us, even now!"

"I don't believe success ever came out of evil, Mike—not really success."

"What do you mean? What's wrong now?" asked Michael wearily. When Millie took her stand on Good and Evil he knew what followed.

"If your invention were a success, isn't it an advantage in war, Michael? The way to kill more people in safety! I can't bear to think of it. All this secrecy between husband and wife seems part of it—and when you do tell me what you were working on you have to confess yourself the enemy of your fellow-men!"

"Is that out of one of Canon Lamb's sermons?" said Michael dryly. "Aeroplanes are not only used for war, Millie—they are for commerce. And if I've found the key to greater control with "safety first" I'm saving life as well as helping to destroy it."

"But you know it will be used for war!" said Millie reproachfully. She would have gone on with the usual reiteration by which so far she had compassed her own way and—as she thought—his salvation, but something in Michael's face deterred her. It was set as she had never seen it; but his comrades had, when he went "over the top" at Loos and was brought in by the Red Cross later

on. Millicent trusted to the adage that "water wears a stone," and during the following weeks her face, if not her voice, said, "You know it will be used for war, Michael!" while he worked at his chemical experiments, his delicate, infinitely exact measurements, and the mathematical points at which the man-made thing was to resist the strain of natural elements. She began to hate the drawings and the plans and the experiments with formulas, and had she been a more passionate woman would have gone down to the shed some day and destroyed the labour of Michael's silent years. But her conscience forbad her to do evil that good might come; and, besides, she was afraid. Her surest weapon was her own health, and as the weeks went by she sighed more and her face grew drawn as if with a mysterious suffering that was not quite disease.

"Something on your wife's mind, isn't there?" said the doctor to Michael tentatively. "Try to prevent her worrying—I can't do any more for her till she gets rid of the mental strain."

Michael's eyes were tragic. For the first time it occurred to him that he might be asked to give up this last darling project and be unable to refuse if the sacrifice were his wife's health. Her unreason, her narrowness of mind which was half jealousy of something she did not understand, were not to be combatted by force. If Millicent chose to lie down and die under her opposition to his inventions, she would not be saved by force or common sense. He knew enough of her to recognise this, and he nearly groaned aloud for the burden laid upon him anew.

His duty as a member of the choir necessitated an attendance at church; but he had never felt so rebellious to the familiar service as on the Sunday following the doctor's visit. Millicent had admitted that she was too

ailing to go to the Minster, in itself so unprecedented that it seemed like a dissolution of her mind and body. But Michael went, and felt the nip of a north-east wind through all his disorganised system so that he shivered even in the heated building. The new Canon was a bold and forceful preacher, in great contrast to Canon Lamb's orthodoxy, but he had never caught Michael's attention to hold it fast until that morning service.

He had chosen for his text a verse from the parable of the Ten Talents, "Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. *Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents*." His voice with its strong harsh utterances challenged the congregation, many of whom did not like him or his modern trend of thought.

"My friends, have *you* hidden your talent in the earth?" thundered the imperious voice. "Have you robbed God of His rights in the fruits of your labour, because of some cowardice you called duty or the fear of the hard work that must perfect your gift,—or even of the opposition of your own family? Remember! he who will not leave father and mother and follow after Christ, cannot receive the promised reward. And God has a right to demand that you shall use the gift that He gave you for His service and men's. 'But,' you will say, 'it was not convenient to perfect my gift. It meant money, or it meant waiting, or it meant years of toil without being able to repay myself or others.' My friends, God meant you to work, and to wait, and to bear with opposition when He gave you that talent. 'Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers,—not locked it up where it

could not yield Me profit.' And you—how will you answer Him in the day of judgment? 'Lord, I knew thee that thou art a hard man . . . and I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth; lo, there thou hast that is thine.' His, remember, not yours. His talent that He has entrusted to you to turn to profit for Him. He is a hard taskmaster, yes, for He scourgeth every son that He receiveth. But is it not better to bear the stripes and earn the name of son than to be a coward and an unprofitable servant?"

The strong voice ceased abruptly. The Canon turned and pronounced the Ascription with the same manner, almost as if it were a threat; and Michael Farley lifted up his head and would have liked to laugh.

"God again!" he said in his heart. "These fellows translate God's intentions as if they had them by rote. Here's one who says that duty to man may go to the devil so long as you follow your own bent, for that's the duty to God; and the other chap told me that God was only pleased by sacrifice, and *that* was my work for Him! Who knows? Not any of these preachers, I'm thinking."

He walked out of the Minster a free man—free at least of being biased by theology. But how it would have affected his personal future was never proved, because Michael Farley became very ill with pneumonia and that year in the trenches claimed its due at last. The doctor said that Millicent was not strong enough to do the nursing, though she instantly protested that no one but herself ought to nurse her darling husband, and if it caused her death it was better that they should go together than that one of them should have to wait in Heaven for the other.

"Who might not come!" Michael added gently.

"Then it would not be Heaven for us, Mike!" Millicent

spoke with a positive conviction that caused a curious flicker across the sick man's face. It was almost like dismay. "Even Heaven would not be Heaven to me without you—I have said so often."

Michael did not answer, nor did he speak much to his wife during what proved to be his last illness. He liked the District nurse whom the doctor insisted on sending to help him; she was a practical, matter-of-fact woman and much more given to the making of beds than talking of life after death. But one day Michael asked her a question in confidence:

"Nurse, do you believe in Heaven?"

"I suppose so, Mr. Farley. I think everyone does more or less, don't you? But there's not much time to sit down and ask oneself such questions in nursing sick bodies."

"No," said Michael slowly. "But supposing a person couldn't go to Heaven without you, and you couldn't get Heaven with them in it! It seems to me that somebody's got to do without."

The Nurse thought he was wandering. "Don't trouble your head about it now," she said soothingly. "I'll give you your medicine——"

Suddenly Michael raised himself with a last rally. "Good-bye, Tom," he said loudly—so loudly that Millicent in the kitchen heard and stood petrified. "There's no Heaven out there—it's bloody Hell. But the Devil won't ask us to give up, and then rag us for it. . . . Chuck your Ten Talents over the top . . . every one of 'em—I'm coming!"

But he went, instead.

V

YESTERDAY

"O God, put back Thy universe and give me Yesterday!"
H. A. Jones and H. Herman, *The Silver King*.

Gwendoline sat on the low wall above the fishing village, and looked down on the roofs of Tregarth huddled round the harbour. These same roofs have become familiar to a public that has never actually seen them, in the smaller rooms of the Royal Academy and more particularly in the water-colour room, because they lend themselves to all sorts of Schools of Art, beginning with the earlier part of the nineteenth century and ending—so far—in vague outlines and beautiful fog in the reign of George the Fifth. They are as effective from the land as from the sea, or in profile from Magog's Cliff, and a very little talent goes a very long way with them as subject.

Behind Gwendoline the land rose steeply to the grounds of Tregarth Manor, where she was staying as one of a house-party that no longer interested her. She would have left it if she could, but there happened to be no other doors open to her at the moment, her mother being comfortably at Le Touquet and her father uncomfortably in India. It had been a great convenience to Mrs. Mornay when Lady Vember invited Gwen to Tregarth to spend part of the summer with her own girls, and Gwen had been so feverish to go that it would not have been easy to deter her even if Mrs. Mornay's elastic conscience had stirred her to more than a warning.

"You'll meet very queer people there, my dear," she said frankly. "And Blanche Vember is really the limit. Don't

play bridge for more than you can afford to lose, and don't come to me if you do. I'm stony. But you know all that without my telling you. All girls know everything nowadays."

"Blanche isn't a bad sort, Mum. She is really more good-natured than Molly or Veronica."

"H'm. Well, I'm glad that Lady Vember asked you, anyway. What I should have done with you——!"

Gwen was twenty. She could no longer be packed into seaside lodgings with a holiday governess, or disposed of in the country houses of elderly relatives. There had been signs of rebellion of late when her parents made arrangements for her, invariably to suit their own long lease of youth, and forgetful of hers; and it seemed like Providence that she should be so satisfied to go to Tregarth this summer. Mrs. Mornay supposed that there was some man in the party who was the attraction—at that age it could not be only tennis and the boating, or freedom from restraint of any kind amongst the Vember girls who were notorious for licence; but she concerned herself very little about it.

"If she makes a fool of herself I can't stop it," she argued. "And Lady Vember will be responsible. I suppose it's one of those cinema men that Molly Vember goes about with in Town. He won't want to marry her, anyway."

Mrs. Mornay did not know that Lieut.-Commander Lennox Ormsby was to be of the house-party, and she would not have connected his presence with Gwen's anticipation of pleasure if she had. She knew very little of Gwen. Her daughter was too unlike herself to promise success in her unconsciously egotistical eyes,—a long slip of a girl who was sometimes decorative but could not be counted upon to be pretty. She had not discovered that

Gwen was beautiful or she might have taken her into more serious consideration as an asset; but she had never seen her daughter with the inward glow of a devotion for the one man who had filled her heart and brain since she was fourteen.

It was an unlikely story. I think Mrs. Mornay would not have credited it even if someone had told it to her from the beginning. Lennox Ormsby was a distant connection of the Vembers, so distant that he seemed to have lost all likeness to them. But it was through meeting Veronica and Molly Vember at a dancing class that Gwendoline had come to meet him, and thenceforward he filled her dreams. He was quiet and rather reticent, and had "no pep. in him," from his cousins' point of view. Perhaps this was why they handed him over to Gwen without envy or reluctance, so that whenever they chanced to meet, the two paired off together naturally and left Molly and Veronica to livelier men. Sometimes a long time elapsed for Gwen between the meetings with him—it was two or three years when he joined his ship on the East India station—but it made no difference. Her love for the man became the inner flame of the girl's life, burning steadily despite the flickering winds of a rank experience of the world gained with every year. His standard was the silent witness of her loyalty, so that she remained pure while countenancing impurity as a matter of course, she kept herself honest while she associated with thinly disguised thieves. She knew without protest from him what he would have disapproved, and for the sake of his simple creed she flung away the habits of thought and living that beset her on every side, and remained an odd, unassociated figure, in a system of immorality and self-amusement that was hardly even denied.

She had loved Lennox Ormsby to her own salvation—

until yesterday. Looking over the familiar roofs of the village to the landlocked bay it seemed to her that the scene should have altered to her altered eyes if to none others. Yet it remained the same. She could see the steep street up which a barefooted boy was climbing, loitering to play with a cat and toss a marble with a playmate—tiny figures they looked from above; she could see the old stone pier, called the Banjo from its rounded end, and the luggers lying off it till it should be fishing tide. She could see the green and blue Cornish sea, and the magnificent line of coast stretching away to the south, with the fury of breakers on it even in this summer calm. All this she had seen many times before, but never with the same eyes. It was the scene that was the same, not herself.

Yesterday had been the limit of her endurance, the breaking point. Up to yesterday she had clung to her shreds of hope, and raised them high like a riven banner in the teeth of a roaring gale of despair. But yesterday she had heard and read of Ormsby's ship going out to China, and had realised for the first time that he was really gone—not to China only, but out of her life. He had left Tregarth three days ago to join his ship at short notice, his leave had been cancelled or curtailed—there was nothing final in that. They had parted suddenly, before the whole house-party, without a chance of private speech, and her hand had lain in his for a moment deadly cold. She could not speak; it was only her eyes that had implored him. She thought his hand had held hers tightly, but she was so near to breakdown that she could not tell. She nearly shrieked, cried out in her extremity to him, oblivious of all those conventional faces that did not matter . . . and while she fought for her self-control he was gone. But there was plenty of time for him to have written to her. His ship was delayed departure after all;

he wrote to Lady Vember, grumbling at his ill-luck, asking trivial questions about a prawning party that was planned for next day and that he had missed, sending personal messages to one or two, herself amongst them. But nothing more. No letter for her carrying his heart in it. She had deceived herself in thinking that he loved her, even a little. Women, infatuated as she was, often did so.

Yet she had hoped—up to yesterday. In the business of departure he might not have found a quiet hour in which to write to her as he must write to satisfy the craving of her womanhood. There was still time for a letter before the ship sailed. But the blow came amongst ordinary surroundings and trivial happenings—merely Molly Vember taking up the morning paper to look at the broadcasting programme. She read the dance music promised from Hylton's band with gabbling relish, and as she threw aside the sheets she added in the same loud hurry, "Old Len's gone—his ship sailed on Tuesday."

Nobody made any comment, but Gwendoline was aware that somebody—Alfred Senpell the painter or Linly Olcott the film star—offered her broiled ham from the sideboard, and that she mechanically refused it. It was some time before she could get hold of the paper and see for herself that what Molly said was true, Commander Ormsby had sailed on the Tuesday. And there was no letter from him by the morning post, or during the day. He had not written to her, even an ordinary letter of friendly farewell, and he had not asked her to write to him. There was nothing to prevent her doing so unasked had he been another man—but she knew him so well that she was super-sensitive in dealing with him. To fling herself at his head, so to speak, was the very way to repel him. It was like the Vembers, and he had once asked her to be as unlike them as possible, though he was on friendly terms

with them. That was when she was fifteen; but she knew that her attraction for him had been her greater reserve, her self-respect that made her almost aloof amongst the "queer people" at Tregarth. Her mother had been right in supposing that she would meet loose characters in that party; what she had not grasped was Gwen's entire indifference to anyone except the central figure of her picture. The others were but as the scenic background, or the supers in a play. She had known them as necessary objects in the scene, lived amongst them and seemed to share their life, but they had hardly any individuality for her—until yesterday.

When she knew that Ormsby had gone it seemed to her that the whole universe had altered or readjusted itself. Things that she had brushed carelessly aside became of sudden significance; she saw life from the angle of Blanche Vember or Alfred Senpell, and it was a new and painful effort to focus it clearly. There had been a fishing party arranged for that very day—the day that was now for ever Yesterday to Gwen—and as they walked down the steep cobbled street to the harbour Blanche took her by the arm and dragged her back a little to point out a young woman mending a fishing net at the door of a cottage, whose eyes were secretive and yet fierce.

"Think her pretty?" said Blanche as they passed. "That's Len's girl. He's been down to see her every time he's stayed with us. She's had two kids by him."

Gwen had turned her face to look at the young woman again, and met her lowering eyes. She was not pretty, but there was something in her that claimed attention—a kind of malign attraction. Gwen did not believe that Ormsby had seduced the girl, or was the father of her children. Blanche told those tales of everybody, being only able to take a sex interest in men or women. But

coming as it did on his desertion it jarred her still further. She almost tried to think that it was true.

"Mr. Senpell ought to paint her," she said indifferently. "He likes that type of face."

"He says he is going to paint you, and call it the Virgin Mary before the conception!"

Gwen smiled scornfully. "He is only trying to be original. Hurry up, Blanche—they are hauling up the lug-sail already."

She remembered every detail of Yesterday, as if it were a series of stereoscopic pictures in her brain. And yet it had been an ordinary summer day, much like others. They had gone out to the river mouth a mile or so down the coast, and had caught lobsters, and had a scratch lunch amongst the evil-smelling nets and pots, which had made her feel a little sick. And then Alfred Senpell had suggested landing and walking home as an alternative to the lugger, and she had been thankful to do so; but nobody else would join them, and so they went alone.

It was a walk she had never taken before, across country rather than by road, but Senpell seemed to know the way. She was glad of the strenuous exercise as an antidote for pain, for it was rough going. She had never before been singled out by Senpell for any reason, or been much alone with him; but suddenly he began to make love to her. She remembered looking at him, at first, in dull surprise. She had never liked him very much, either physically or mentally. He was very tall and of a loose build that struck her as angular and double-jointed; and she disliked the effect of his thick dusty hair which looked as though he never brushed it. His moral character was so rank—in the mouths of Blanche and Molly Vember—that she had been faintly disgusted, the more so in that her standard

was rigidly that of Ormsby at the time. Yet the man claimed her attention by the very force of his confessed passion for her. She had never had a man make love to her with such virility or heat—she would not have believed it possible from Alfred Senpell with his pose, his modernity, his lack of earnestness even in his art. His attack upon her senses gave her a momentary respite from her own trouble, so that she listened to him willingly as one turns with relief to a drug that shall allay anguish, but without any real consent to his pleading. He told her how to appreciate her own beauty, which no one had ever done before, and almost scolded her for neglect of her own advantages. She must arrange her hair differently, wear certain colours, remember that she was most perfect in profile. He spoke with authority, for once genuine, both as man and artist. She remembered the look of his eyes and the movements of his expressive hands, and that she had found him even less tolerable when he was exaggerated by his own earnestness. Emotion made him really hideous.

They had paused on the open moor to rest their weariness and to talk. She remembered the patches of gorse and the great blocks of granite, beneath one of which they had sat down, and the pewits calling to each other mournfully. The world seemed as empty as her own heart, and she drew involuntarily nearer to Senpell with a forlorn sense of mental solitude as well as physical. But when he wanted to rape her, then and there, on the open moor, she had refused and struggled so successfully that she saw him flung back from her, quivering and panting, like a thwarted animal.

"But why not here?" he stammered. "Why not now?"

"Under the open sky!" she muttered, as if shocked at his indecency.

"Will sheets and blankets make a natural act more natural?" he retorted. "Well, come to me to-night if you will have it so. It means more hours of torture for me, that is all. You promise?"

She did not promise. She did not mean to go. The whole thing had come on her so unexpectedly that she was more surprised than outraged, but the suggestion coming from Senpell did not attract her in any way. All through the walk home he talked still of his passion for her, and reproached her for denying him. He seemed to find neither shame nor reticence in the situation, and was frankly contemptuous of a woman who remained virgin because she was not legally married. Her ears, accustomed to this kind of talk from Blanche or from her sisters, were not shocked or disgusted as they might have been had she associated with more conventional people; but she did not apply it to herself, any more than she would have done the outpouring of a child whose talk she permitted to distract her own thoughts.

"You don't like me?" said Senpell at length, and when she admitted it he added, "That does not matter. I know I'm ugly, but *at night all cats are grey!*"

Then she was obliged to laugh, and the fact that she could laugh at such a man and such a suggestion struck her as ghastly. She had loved Ormsby for his standard of life as well as for himself, and with the removal of his personality and all connection with him she seemed to have lost the straight road of honour in which she had tried to follow him, and to be wandering on a plain as limitless as the moor. All her boundaries were gone, and she had reached a point when it seemed to matter very little what she did or resisted.

Her thoughts, following herself through Yesterday, began to falter. At what hour did the realisation of

Ormsby's absence become intolerable? Was it the physical weariness of the long tramp home, or Senpell's suggestion that had taken root in her sub-conscious mind, or the actual blinding pain of having lost what she most craved? She did not know. She only knew that Senpell had guessed so much of her secret as told him that she was unhappy, and had promised her that he could make her forget if only for an hour or so. She had gone to him that night, and it had not made her forget at all. The experience was nothing but a slight sense of distaste and indecency, which might be nausea if it were repeated. She had been tired of the man's caresses before very long, and sick of her own act. There was no compensation in it at all, nor oblivion of anything else. She was acutely conscious of herself, of Alfred, even of their surroundings in the summer night. He was sleeping out, under canvas, for his own caprice, and she had got out of the house with some difficulty to join him. The dark flapping of the tent and the smell of trodden grass beneath the waterproof sheet on the ground, were as vivid to her as the man's embrace. They seemed of as much importance as herself or him, and she listened to the near cry of a nightjar as much as to his whispered words and sighs. A feeling of blank discouragement was her chief emotion, of having been cheated and mistaken. This importance, this act of passion between men and women, was nothing in actual experience. It had been dressed up and tricked out in people's powers of description until it sounded like Heaven and Hell. But it was nothing but a bogey, easily unmasked. It had no significance, it had no power of guilt. It was slightly ridiculous and physically repulsive; but it hardly reached the dignity of pleasure or pain. She was in the position of one who steps over a precipice expecting to take Eternity by storm,

and finds himself still firmly on his feet on a lower level of ordinary earth.

* * * * *

As she sat upon the low wall and looked down at Tregarth village, Gwen was hardly regretful of Yesterday, so much as dully despairing of herself. She had failed to drug herself from pain, and the experience of last night was only like a debauch that left an evil taste in her mouth. Even repentance cheated her. She did not repent because she found no cause to do so. It was a little distasteful to think that she had allowed Alfred Senpell so much intimacy; but it was easily forgotten. She fixed her thoughts upon the boy climbing the village street, and found that Yesterday failed to possess her mind.

Whither was the boy going? She knew his bare black head even from a distance. It was Billy Tomms. His mother kept a tobacconist's shop in which she sold sweets as well. Billy paused to play with the cat, and then climbed on with his sunburnt hands in the pockets of his patched knickerbockers. He was Celtic in type like most of the village—like that young woman Blanche had pointed out as Ormsby's mistress—but she would not think of that.

Gwen focused her thoughts again on Billy Tomms, climbing out of the head of the steep street on to the road that led to Tregarth Manor, and she wondered if he had a message from the luggers, of a school out in the bay. No one from the Manor had been out fishing this morning. But Billy did not take the road to the big house; he turned off on to the bit of waste land bounded by the wall on which Gwen was seated, and presently his round black head came bobbing up the hillside towards her. She turned and watched him with no premonition of fate, and when he reached her she waited for him to speak, with some surprise.

"Mother be very sorry your letter was in our newspaper," he said with a breathless embarrassment that made his Cornish speech difficult to follow by her alien ears. "The postman left it tu days ago, but Mother wer' busy wi' the shop and didn't open it. The letter were inside the paper——" He reached down into the depths of his ragged pocket and produced a letter directed to Miss Gwen Mornay at Tregarth Manor. It was in Ormsby's writing.

"When did you say it came?" she gasped, almost snatching it from him.

"Three days ago, must have. Mother put t' packet aside and forgot it until to-day. She's very sorry, miss." He paused while Gwen sat with her letter in her hands, staring past him as if she saw into another world. "We catched sight of ee up here, and I knew 'twas you, and Mother says, 'Run up now and don't keep the lady waiting any longer!'"

He had loitered to play on the way up, as Gwen knew, but he was plainly in hope of a tip. She felt in the pocket of her jumper suit mechanically and found a shilling which she handed to him, and he turned at once as if to bound away with his booty.

"Wait a minute, Billy," she said in an odd voice. "Where did you say the letter was found? Slipped into the fold of a newspaper packet?"

"Yes, miss——" He added suspiciously, "It weren't our fault!"

"No, of course not—or the postman's. It is just one of those things that happen once in a lifetime." She nodded to the boy, who scudded away with relief, and sat still, holding the letter in her hands and remembering curious instances she had read of like this—of letters not delivered for a lifetime because they fell into some niche where the postman could not collect them from the box,

of others delivered in folded packets—like her own—lost or stolen. Well, she had been lucky, she had her letter, and it was only three days late.

If it had come before yesterday!

She opened the letter slowly, but did not read it at once. There was a great glow all over her because Lennox Ormsby had written to her after all, because he had not wished to end their friendship and wipe her out of his life for two years, because it was still the great incentive of her life. . . .

Yesterday!——

She opened and read what he had written, at last. And it was all there, all that she most needed and wished. The doubt of him, grown out of Blanche's indictment of the young woman mending the fishing net, vanished like smoke before the clean wind of his words blowing over her fevered heart. He was with her again through his letter, and she knew instantly that he had never been grimed with the fisher's daughter or fathered her nameless children.

Ormsby was a shy man when with her, or his reserve made him seem so. But in his letter he could say out what he had thought out, and that with an earnestness that was almost authority. He laid the whole of his intent before her—love and marriage, the one to follow the declaration of the other as soon as possible. He did not like her to be at Tregarth, though it was the only house where he could have met her, and her presence the reason for his being there himself. He hated the whole atmosphere of the Vembers' house-party—a great deal more for her than for himself—and he wanted to sweep her out of it into the protection of his own arms. She was his dear little pal, his sweetheart, from her school-days. He had always meant to marry her, but he was

not sufficiently assured to take it for granted that he had only to ask and to have. He meant to ask her before they left Tregarth, but the order to rejoin his ship had taken him by surprise. He was obliged to write what he had meant to say.

His intentions being altered he had arranged his plans to suit. He did not expect to be long on the China station; at the end of September his sister was going out to rejoin her husband in Singapore, and if Gwen came out with her they could be married there. She felt his thought for her in all this, the determination to take her into his own safe keeping despite difficulties and inconvenience. Even if he must leave her in Singapore she would be his own, and not tossed to and fro in such households as the Vembers or those her mother preferred and frequented. It had been an ugly life for a girl; but at least Mrs. Mornay would raise no objection to Gwen's marrying him. She would most gaily say good-bye to her own responsibility, lightly as it had weighed upon her. It was unlikely that Captain Mornay would object either. He was in too harassing a position with the Indian unrest to be able to have his daughter with him, even if he had wished. Gwen had been practically derelict since she left the schoolroom.

She sat on the old stone wall fondling Ormsby's letter in her hands, with a face flushed and tremulous. It made her warm and ardent as no other man's kisses could have done, the mere feeling of it seemed Lennox's very self close to her. For a few minutes she forgot everything but the trembling surprise of her happiness, which was like a blaze of sunlight in her face after storm. He loved her, he wanted her, she was safe. . . .

She raised herself from her easy, happy position, and she gasped. This thing that she had done, and which

was so trivial, suddenly had an immense significance. It grew in dimension as she faced it until it became large enough to fill her life and to overpower it. She had regarded Alfred Senpell and his agency in her experience of last night with an indifference that made him but a means to an experiment—an experiment that had been unsuccessful in drugging her pain and for which she felt nothing but contempt. She never meant to repeat it, though she was aware that his thirst for her was unslaked and that he would drum at her ear with his importunities. He was to be avoided, that was all, and when she left Tregarth she need not meet him again as he had no *entrée* into the circle in which her mother moved. She was almost as callous as Veronica or Blanche might be with regard to the conventional aspect of the thing, let alone the moral. It was an experience, that was all.

But Ormsby's letter had changed all that. She knew that she had irrevocably cut herself adrift from the safe mooring of marriage with him by her act of last night, unimportant though it had seemed until now. The anguish of such realisation lifted her almost to her feet and brought a scream up into her throat which made her press her hands on her mouth to stop it.

She never thought for a moment that she might deceive him and accept his love as if she were still what he thought her. That secret between them would have spoilt the whole of her married life, and if it were no longer a secret she could not live with him and see the suspicion in his eyes—not only of the past but of the present. She knew what his standard was; it was this that had made her love him at first—because he was so different from the men and women amongst whom she had been brought up, and so finely honourable. She could not dirty his honour, or offer him something less than the best which he had

seen in her. Despite all complications of self-interest, or association with people less scrupulous, despite even her undisciplined yearning for him, she realised that the greater necessity to her was the fact that she loved him and could not wrong him.

She must answer his letter and tell him that she would not marry him. If necessary, she thought in her hard youth that she must tell him exactly why. It was the honest way, and the certain way to end it. If anyone had told her yesterday that she would be offered Lennox Ormsby's love and would refuse it, she would have laughed outright. It was impossible. But the thing had happened. She laughed now, suddenly and harshly, as a man might laugh who saw rescue approach him just a few inches short of hideous death. The peals of laughter broke from her young mouth again and again and lost themselves in the open air over the roofs of Tregarth village. It was all so silly that she could not cry as if at a tragedy, or curse at fate, or lose her senses through despair. And it seemed to her that even God in heaven must laugh too, and that they shared the joke, as if she had made a farce out of life for His amusement. Given the grand elements—Love, Honour, Loyalty—Sin, Treachery, Damnation—one had only to shuffle the words and they could become a spectacle for mockery.

She sat there laughing at herself and the ruin she had made of her castles in the air, as a child laughs at the house of cards it has laboriously built up only to knock down. And the humour of it was worse than any dignity of sorrow.

VI

THE CHANGELING

The January day was drawing in, and it was time to light the nursery lamp when Mrs. Sherell came into the room to send the nurse-girl down to her tea. She did not draw the curtains of the window because the light from the old stone house looked cheerful to her husband riding home in the dusk from a long day with hounds; but she did draw the curtains a little round the old-fashioned basinette wherein the baby lay sleeping. The nurse-girl had clattered down the outside staircase to the kitchen in her hurry for a gossip, almost before Mrs. Sherell had done lighting and turning the lamp wick down to prevent it smoking, but the lamp once started the mother bent over the bassinet again as if glad to be alone with her child.

The baby was sleeping, but even in sleep it was not a pretty child. It was too pallid, and the little face was peaked and rather pathetic in its delicacy. But to the mother it was beautiful, and as she hung above it she saw, in fancy, the immature features alter to those of a little child, and then to those of a girl and young woman. The baby would be a companion to her, and would never fail to fill her universe, both then and now. Her sharpened eyes saw that it had not been the all-sufficing wonder and delight to its father that it had been to her, and she jealously loved it for both. But in time, when it could toddle and begin to lisp, its pretty ways would make it a favourite with her man as with herself. She wished and prayed for this; and yet she cherished it, perhaps, more while it was weakly and ailing and all her own.

Annie Sherell had two devotions in her life, her husband and her child, and her rather cramped heart had room for no more. She had lost her father and mother, and had few relations, when Reuben Sherell married her, and she looked upon him as the most wonderful man on earth. He had saved her from the drudgery of a nursery governess's life when such posts were no sinecure, and from a future which might end in pinched old age in an alms-house. Marriage was the crown and career of womanhood in the mid-Victorian period of Annie's youth, and that she had attained to it seemed to her a miracle. Reuben Sherell was not above her in station save in worldly wealth; but he had sufficient position and means to have married a better dowered girl. He took her out to the stone house on Dartmoor, and made her mistress of its big, inconvenient rooms and many cupboards, with three maids to help her in the elaborate housekeeping of the '60's. They were country servants, rough-voiced and under-educated, but they did not expect luxuries any more than their mistress. And indeed the wide hearths where big fires blazed in winter, and the home-made bread and home-cured bacon, made Buckland Spiney a "well-found" house of its day. Sherell was a surveyor under Government of the herds of ponies and cattle on the Moor, and owned venville rights himself. He had free grazing for his own stock, and could cut peat for his great open hearths. It was his duty to be present at the "drifts" of the ponies when they were brought in to be overlooked for trespassers. Those that were marked or branded belonged to other owners or vils, but sometimes there were animals that had been smuggled in and had no right to the rough pasturage of the Moor. These were trespassers, and if found were sent to Dunnabridge Pound, and if unclaimed were sold. Reuben Sherell was a good surveyor for the Government and very

strict at the drifts, which were more frequent in his day than they are now.

It was a lonely life for Mrs. Sherell until the baby came, but she never formulated the thought. She had been used to towns, and to the society of those she lived with, though in a subordinate position. When her husband was away she had no one to speak to save the servants and the villagers, whose dialect was so rough that it was like a foreign language, for there was not even a church and parsonage within four or five miles, and in winter the drive in an open trap was a serious consideration. But she was sufficiently absorbed in her wifehood and motherhood to be a contented woman, her acknowledged drawbacks being an almost superstitious fear of robbers and gipsies, and of the folklore of the Moor. She hated her husband being late with hounds, as he was on this January evening, not only for some reasonable ill that might have befallen him—his horse bogged, or himself thrown—but for a secret dread of his being Pixy-led, or meeting with the Wisht Huntsman and the little men of Wistman's Wood. She was afraid of the Moor, and it seemed to her ill-omened and threatening even in the summer. But she was a "foreigner," as the moorland-bred people said, and her timidity made its solitude and sullen splendour unhomelike even though it had become her home.

The baby slept so peacefully in her bassinet that after a while Mrs. Sherell ventured to leave the nursery and to run down to the porch to listen for her husband's horse. She was, for the moment, more anxious about him than her child, though the baby's health had kept her on the watch ever since its birth. Outside the nursery was a passage with a heavy door always bolted at night, for beyond it was a flight of stone steps leading down to the kitchen and the outhouses. It was by this outside stair that the nurse-

girl had gone to her tea, and Mrs. Sherell looked mechanically to see that the door was closed against the draught, but not bolted. The girl would be returning in a moment. She was reconciled to these outer stairs because of her fear of fire. There were heavy wooden beams in the house, and she had sometimes dreamed that the nursery was in flames and that she was rushing down these solid stone steps with Alberta in her arms. The baby had been christened Alberta out of sentiment for the late Prince Consort (there were many Victorias and Alberts in those days), but Mrs. Sherell already called her Tiny as a diminutive.

The real staircase of the house lay beyond the nurseries at a different angle to the stone steps, and Mrs. Sherell descended to the ground floor by these broad slippery steps, crossed the square hall, and stood in the porch with her head stretched out to listen. The air was dank and chill, but not frosty, and the wind was still. She listened for a few minutes, half her attention on the upper floor, to hear if Tiny cried, even while she strained for the sound of a horse's feet outside. But everything was quiet, and after a minute's hesitation between her motherhood and wifehood she walked down the narrow garden path between box edging, to the hedge that divided the strip of front garden from the private road that went round to the stables. There was no carriage drive or anything pretentious at Buckland Spiney. When the master rode he mounted in the stable yard, and should he take the mistress in the gig that was their only vehicle save the farm carts, she must brave the rain or snow between the side door and the same cobbled space. The narrow garden before the broad stone front of the house was all there was of attempt at decoration, and the beds held old-fashioned flowers which have long since been improved out of recognition.

There were no flowers visible now, nor flowering shrubs

such as lighten more modern winters. Mrs. Sherell was not an imaginative woman, but even she was struck by the utter lack of life in the landscape. The Moor looked so dull and dead this January evening that it seemed it could never revive again. Even the starved grass along the roadside was more grey than green, and a plantation of stunted oaks behind the house showed nothing but black skeletons against the sky. She shivered a little, more with the mental depression than chill, though she had not waited to put a shawl over her homespun house gown. She wished that her husband could come home that she might go indoors again to the comfort of the blazing fires and the oil lamps. When he was late like this she always expected him to be brought home on a hurdle, his horse limping behind; but it was not really late for a hunting day, not more than half-past four, or five o'clock.

Mrs. Sherell had been looking up the rough road along which she expected her husband, and had seen neither human being, horse, nor vehicle, but she was startled to a cry by the approach of a tall woman in a cloak who might have risen out of the earth so suddenly had she appeared. She was walking along under the hedge, on the road-side nearest to the house, and dragging her feet as if weary, but Mrs. Sherell had not heard or seen her until they were within a few feet of each other. In the growing dusk the woman was a strange enough figure to have startled anyone, but there was antagonism mingled with the fear in Annie's eyes. She recognised her in the first place as a gipsy, and in the second as a creature of ill reputation. Her name was Mrs., or Gipsy Dale, and she was said to have the evil eye, to know too much of the spirits of the Moor, to be in league with Pixies and the Wistmen and other supernatural apparitions. In appear-

ance Gipsy Dale was about forty years of age, with straggling black hair under a faded red handkerchief and a face so weather-browned that it was as dark as old wood. Her eyes were oddly set, slanting, and glittered even in the dusk. She was dressed in an old coat like a man's, but over her shoulders she wore a large and ragged shawl which partly protected a basket she carried under her arm supposed to hold her wares for sale, but more often suspected of holding eggs stolen from hen-roosts or other loose property certainly not her own. She was an unwelcome visitor to housewives, but not to their maids, who haggled with her for ribbons and tapes and odds and ends brought from the scattered towns, and paid her to tell their fortunes. She had no known habitation, but her powers of tramping must have been extraordinary if the Wisht Huntsman did not give her a lift now and then, as the moor-men firmly believed. She had been met as far off as Plymouth and Exeter, and her beat included the Stannery towns of Tavistock and Chagford and Ashburton, as well as Widdicombe-in-the-Moor.

Annie Sherell was not particularly intelligent, but she had the intuition occasionally granted to her sex, and from the first time of seeing Gipsy Dale she had felt strong antagonism to her. Once or twice she had ordered the vagrant off the premises with a ruthlessness born of instinctive fear rather than self-assertiveness, and meeting her suddenly like this in the dusk, when anxious for her husband's safety, seemed like a premonition of evil. The gipsy was obviously tired and had come a long way, for she limped as she approached Mrs. Sherell and greeted her half civilly and half shyly.

"Good evening to you, lady. Are you wanting any tapes and trinkets and such like from the towns?"

"No,—we want nothing—nor tramps either at Buckland.

Go back the way you came, and not through the yard," said Mrs. Sherell shortly and almost rudely.

Gipsy Dale's weary figure braced itself and she stood at her full height, towering over the shorter woman on the other side of the garden hedge.

"Fair words hurt nobody!" she said with a glint in those slanting eyes. "And if you do not buy, your maidens may. I should be glad of a rest by the kitchen fire, and do no harm to any under this roof." There was something almost menacing in her wild face and figure that drove Mrs. Sherell to angry retort.

"I tell you we want none of your stuff. I do not like my maids listening to your nonsense and filling their heads with fortune-telling. If you do not go I shall call one of the men and have you turned out."

"Fair and softly, lady!" The gipsy's face was wicked now, and she licked her lips like an animal as she laughed. "There was a right o' way through Buckland before ever *you* come to the house, and I may pass through if I may not rest. I would have brought you good luck—but I can take it as well as leave it!"

Mrs. Sherell hestitated for a fatal moment. What Mrs. Dale said was true, there was and always had been a right of way through Buckland Spiney, from the private road and the yard out across the fields; but few took it on a January evening since it led only to the wildest part of the Moor. Had she called one of the men he would at least have seen Gipsy Dale off the premises, though he might not deter her passing through the yard if she had made up her mind; but just at that moment Mrs. Sherell heard the hoof beats for which she had been listening, and with a feeling of relief turned to see her husband riding towards her. She called to him through the dusk, meaning to appeal to him to get rid of her unwelcome visitor, and his cheery

"Hulloa!" showed her that at least there was nothing wrong with him. She opened the gate mechanically and stepped out into the road, looking up at him with relief as he pulled his eager horse to a standstill, but when she turned round again the gipsy was gone. Her long stride must have carried her out of sight through the yard gate almost before Reuben Sherell had reached his wife, and there was no least flutter of her cloak visible.

"Well, Annie, what's amiss?" said the man's hearty voice as he bent from the saddle. "We've had a long run and finished up at Bellever or I should have been home by daylight."

"I'm glad you're back, for I was getting anxious. And that wayfaring woman, Gipsy Dale, was worrying me with her impudence. I told her to go, but she said she had a right to walk through the yard—looking to pick up a fowl, most likely! I thought I saw something move in her basket as it was."

"Where did she go to?" Reuben asked, straightening himself in the saddle. "I can see nowt of her."

"Round to the kitchens, like as not, to sell her trash to the maids. Turn her out if you see her, Ru, while I go back to Baby."

"She's out of the yard by now, if she went thicky," said Reuben easily. "But I'm going to put Sultan in and tell the lads to give him a mash, for he's had the hardest work of the day. If I see Mother Dale I'll settle it."

Mrs. Sherell looked after him as he rode on to the yard, with love in her eyes. She still thought him as handsome as when he had raised her to the summit of bewildered bliss by asking her to marry him with the sheepish manner of a big boy. He was a tall, heavily built man with a long, rather expressionless face and an obstinate jaw; but in some ways he was still like a boy in heart, and she knew it

as no one else did. She went back through the house and up the front stairs to the nursery where the nurse-girl was moving about the room with a show of making up the fire and trimming the lamp which suggested a guilty conscience. Mrs. Sherell instantly guessed that she had only just returned from her tea, and that the baby had been left alone; but as it still slept peacefully behind its lace curtains she said nothing at the moment, but bent down to kiss the tiny face.

The house was suddenly startled by a wild cry that rang through the nursery and across the passage, penetrating even to the hall which Reuben Sherell was just entering from the side door. It was so shrill with despair and horror that it sounded as if all the evil spirits on the Moor were let loose under that comfortable, commonplace roof to haunt Buckland for evermore. Reuben clapped his hands to his ears to shut it out, but another and another came wailing from the room above and sent him flying up the stairs to meet the nurse-girl coming down with a face flabby with fear.

"The mistress—come to the mistress, master! Her bin gone mad!" she gasped.

Reuben pushed her on one side, and running as fast as his heavy riding boots allowed reached the landing and burst into the nursery. His wife was standing by the bassinet, uttering those awful cries, and stammering so with fear and grief that at first he could not make out what she said.

"My baby—my child—she's not there! She's stolen—"

She flung herself upon her husband's breast, clutching at him with her hands as if distraught, and holding her in his arm the man bent down to look into the cradle, his own big frame trembling with reflected fear.

There, on the frilled white pillow, rested the fair head of the child, its face pink and peaceful in the lamplight, and as the man peered at it the blue eyes opened like two

points of light and sparkled at him. The little creature turned and twisted in its bed, doubling its hands up and kicking as if with fun. Reuben drew a deep breath of relief and held his wife away from him to stare at her.

"Why, the child's there safe enough, Annie, and more lively than I've seen her! Whatever have you got in your head?"

"It's not my child—not ours!" Mrs. Sherell almost screamed. "It's been changed—that cursed woman has got in and stolen Tiny and left this in her place!"

The man looked from the child in the cradle to his wife's convulsed face, with utter perplexity. He thought she had suddenly gone off her head, though what had caused it he could not tell. She had seemed upset and nervous when she spoke to him at the gate. Perhaps the gipsy had frightened her.

"Come, come, Annie!" he said kindly. "What's hap to ee? The baby's ours all right—who could have changed it? You're dreaming, my dear—look at her again."

But Mrs. Sherell would hardly be persuaded to go near the cradle. She shivered and shook as Reuben drew the curtains back and showed her the laughing little face and bright hair.

"Do you think I don't know my own child?" she said fiercely. "Did Tiny ever look like that? She's a changeling, that thing—she's not human!"

The man was almost shocked. It seemed to him unheard of that a mother should turn against her own child, and he was convinced that the baby was their own, only it looked a little brighter and rosier to-day than he had seen it before. Annie must have got some morbid idea of her child's delicacy and saw it with demented eyes. He did not know what to do in this crisis.

Mrs. Sherell settled the matter for him by rushing out of the room and thrusting aside the scared nurse-girl

as she ran downstairs and out of the house like one distracted. Calling to the nurse to look after the child, Reuben Sherell followed his wife more slowly, wondering what would be the outcome of it all, feeling stiff and tired from his long day in the saddle and more inclined to stretch his legs before the fire in the parlour than follow this wild-goose chase. He could not believe that the child had been stolen or exchanged for another—it was not possible. In the few minutes in which he had lingered to speak to the nurse-girl she had volubly assured him that she had been back in the nursery almost as soon as the mistress left it, and that nothing had been seen of Gipsy Dale in the kitchen.

"You don't know that, girl, if you were not there, and you say you only spent ten minutes tu your tea and went back tu your duty!" said Sherell shrewdly. He suspected that the girl was lying, and that she had been longer away than she admitted; but even in that case he did not think the gipsy would have had time to get into the nursery and exchange the baby for another, had she attempted such a trick. It was fantastic and without reason to his slow, practical mind, and must be a sudden freak of his wife's, born of feminine hysteria.

He found Mrs. Sherell questioning the men and boys in the stable yard with an excitement that convinced her husband more and more of her unhinged state of mind. But none of them had seen Gipsy Dale according to their own statements, either going to the house or crossing the yard. They stared at the poor woman, who was nearly frantic with fear and grief, and shook their heads at her demand that they should put the horse in the gig and drive over the Moor in search of the vagrant. When Reuben appeared he vetoed the suggestion at once. It was too late to do anything of the sort, there would not

be the least chance of overtaking the gipsy, even if she were there, for she would take a short cut across country where no trap could follow. She could find her way even better than the moor-men, and was notorious for her quickness in getting from one place to another. They did not even know in which direction she had gone, even if she had stolen the child. And besides—there was the child upstairs in its own bassinet!

"Not my child! Not my child!" wailed the mother distractedly. "It is something evil she has left—a changeling!"

The men looked more impressed than their master, for to their superstition and belief in the supernatural Gipsy Dale was capable of having bewitched, if she had not stolen, the child, and flown away on a broomstick. Reuben Sherell put an end to the discussion peremptorily by telling his wife to come back to the house, and saying that he would listen to no more nonsense. The child was safe and well, and she was under a delusion born of her fear of old Mother Dale.

But for once he found that his authority over his gentle, yielding wife was set at nought. She was no longer the weaker vessel to be ruled by her lord and master, for the maternal instinct in her was stronger even than habit. If they would not help her—cowards that they were!—she would go alone to search for her darling, and she turned and spat in their faces like a woman gone mad before she broke from them and ran out of the yard and through the gate on to the wide Moor in the increasing darkness. Her violence was so unprecedented that her husband was now convinced that she was not responsible for her actions, and hastily sending a stable-boy for a lantern he started to follow her and bring her back by force, if not by persuasion.

Annie had not waited to put on shawl and bonnet or thicker shoes. She ran by instinct straight for the rising ground behind Buckland Spiney, and skirting the plantation of stunted oaks from which the place took its name she was actually climbing Buckland Tor before her husband and the boy came through the gate by which she had left, the light of the lantern bobbing round their slower feet. Her excitement kept her up and gave her a nervous strength that carried her over the rough ground and made even the darkness visible to her unaccustomed eyes. She was timid by day, and afraid of the wildness of the Moor, never venturing far by herself. But her brain was tortured by the thought of her delicate child out there in the raw winter's night, in the power of an evil woman, wailing for its mother, perhaps stricken with death already. She stretched her arms to the ominous black sky and called on God to rescue her baby, and to give her strength to go on until she found the wild fluttering figure of the gipsy and snatched the treasure she had stolen from her.

Though she did not know it she had walked a mile or more when she stumbled over a piece of granite in the rough grass, where the rocks of another, lower Tor began to break out like the bones of the earth showing through her covering. It brought Mrs. Sherell to her knees, but she gave a cry of triumph as she saw something gleaming on the dead heather before her. It was a long narrow streamer of bright silk ribbon—such a piece as the gipsy carried for sale in her basket, and Annie clutched it with trembling hands. The vagrant had come this way, and her instinct had not failed her. The ribbon had dropped from her basket—how else could it have been on the Moor, so far from a dwelling, this winter night? She braced her trembling limbs for a last effort, and looked round her wildly.

"Oh, God, give me back my darling!" she prayed; and it seemed as if the Moor rose up around her and engulfed her in blackness.

* * * * *

Reuben Sherell and the boy found her some hours later, lying exhausted amongst the stones of Lesser Tor, and Reuben stayed by her side until the boy could get help to carry her home. The horror and the exposure of that night might have killed a stronger woman; but though she lay for months in the fourpost bed at Buckland Spiney it seemed that her spirit could not pass while the conviction remained with her that her baby might be alive and calling for her. She lay with unseeing eyes, hearing always the wail of a small thing that might be neglected or roughly treated, and her heart hardened within her. When the first harshness of the Spring was past, and a few mild days brought out the primroses in the narrow garden beds, Annie Sherell came downstairs, an altered woman from the one who had waited for her husband on that January evening, with a face from which the youth and softness had fled. She looked old before her time, and though she took up her position and her duties again as Reuben Sherell's wife, she carried them as a burden where before they had been an honour.

But if the mother had pined and faded, the child had not. During the months when Annie lay upstairs the baby had grown and flourished, until instead of being ailing and sickly it was as healthy and strong as a child double its age, and threatened to be too much for the servants at Buckland Spiney. They were half afraid of it, as of something beyond nature, and whispered to each other that it had been bewitched and that was why the mother did not recognise it. They did not believe in the tale of Gipsy Dale having entered the house that fatal

evening, but they were sufficiently superstitious about the woman to believe that she might have cast an evil spell upon the child out of spite for the mother's turning her away, and that without ever coming nigher the babe.

Mrs. Sherell never asked for the baby while she was ill, and the first time it was brought near to her she shuddered and would not take it in her arms. But on the other hand Reuben Sherell took a greater interest in his daughter than he had done before she made such a marvellous recovery in health. He was secretly proud of her weight and strength for an infant, and later on of her beauty, for she began to develop into a remarkably beautiful child. Her hair was as bright as spun gold and grew thick and curly on her small head, and her eyes were as blue as speedwell blooming in the hedges. It was noticeable that they never filled with tears like other children's, however. She would scream and kick with passion if she could not get her own way, and even cry sometimes with anger; but never with sorrow. When her mother was forced to take charge of her again she trained and taught her strictly though not harshly, and it was perhaps to make up for his wife's unloving attitude that her father was the more indulgent. Her name of Alberta was early shortened to Bertie as the only diminutive suitable to her, for she showed the fearlessness and courage of a boy. Annie never called her "Tiny," as she had done the ailing baby of her love. Somewhere under lock and key Mrs. Sherell kept a length of bright silk ribbon that she had found that winter's night on Lesser Tor, the only link that she had with Gipsy Dale's appearance at Buckland Spiney. It was poor proof of her conviction, but for years she never ceased to brood in secret on the metamorphosis of her child or its disappearance, and she resented her husband's partiality to this new Alberta and the know-

ledge that if she could have had her heart's desire and recovered the gentle, delicate child she had lost he would not really have welcomed the exchange. This stranger, this interloper, was becoming more to him than his own flesh and blood. He accepted her in his matter-of-fact manner as his daughter, and tried to laugh his wife out of her strange delusion, until at last the subject was never mentioned between them.

When Alberta was seven or eight years old she was sent to school at the nearest place where education was possible. This was a village some four miles off in which two gentlewomen, the orphan daughters of a clergyman, had started a little school. Had it been the child of her dreams Mrs. Sherell would never have sent "Tiny" to school, but would have taught her herself with loving care. She had been well educated according to the standard of the '60's, and could have given her daughter the same accomplishments that were thought essential—a little French and drawing, to be a good needlewoman, even to play the piano,—as well as the ordinary course of reading and writing and arithmetic, history and geography. But Bertie was becoming turbulent as well as intelligent, and for a secret fear in her heart Mrs. Sherell was reluctant to discipline the child herself. Every time she punished her she had a sick fancy that it might be visited upon Tiny, for she had never abandoned the hope that her child was living somewhere, even though it were in the cruel grip of Gipsy Dale. Her ears were always open for news of the gipsy, and once she took the long journey to Exeter in pursuit of a false clue, but though she heard vague rumours of Mrs. Dale she was never seen in the neighbourhood of Dartmoor now, and those who said they had met her "maybe a year since" had never known her to be accompanied by a child.

Reuben Sherell drove his daughter to the village school and sent one of his servants to fetch her, until he had taught her to ride. The Dartmoor ponies were hardy and reliable, and the girl rode like a boy long before it became the custom for children. She was so fearless and so capable that before long she could go alone, her father insisting that she should be home by daylight, but he sent his big sheep dog with her as guardian, and it would have gone ill with anyone who molested her. She learned quickly, with a surprising intelligence, and would have been the show pupil in the little school had it not been for two drawbacks. One was the rebellious mischief that led her into endless difficulties with her teachers and made them despair of keeping order when Bertie had an impish mood; the other the influence she had over other children. It was a mixed school for boys and girls up to nine years, owing to the lack of other means of education, and every boy in the class was Bertie's bounden slave. She might tease them and flout them, but they would follow her like her dog, and the result was envy amongst the girls and a flattering power for Bertie that her schoolmistresses considered "Most undesirable" from a Victorian standpoint.

"If she is paid such attention as a little maid, what will it be when she is older!" they whispered to each other. "She boxes their ears, too—I am afraid she will be a hoyden!"

Terrible word!

"Let her alone," said Reuben laughing, when these stories reached him. "If the lads make fools of themselves about her, I'd sooner have her slap their faces than mince and prink like other little girls. She loves her old dad better than any young spark, don't you, Bertie?"

"Indeed, I love none but you!" said the child boldly, climbing on to his knee. She tossed back her golden hair

and looked at Annie with her brilliant blue eyes that had a hint of defiance in them. "None but you!" she repeated, caressing the man's hard face with her soft hands.

"And your mother!" Reuben amended reprovingly. "You love your father and mother equally, little maid, until the time comes when you have a husband, and then you will love him best of all."

"My mother does not love me as you do!" said the child with a shrewd elfin look in her fair face. "She loves the other Alberta she would like me to be!"

"What's all this nonsense?" said Reuben sternly. "Who has been telling you tales? Not you, Annie?"

But his wife, with her drawn mouth, was silent.

"Listen, Bertie," said the man with unusual authority. "You are never to say such things again, or I shall be angry with you. You are our own little daughter, and as long as you are a good girl we shall not wish you otherwise. Now go and kiss your mother, and say you are sorry."

The child laughed, a peal of laughter that mocked him while she obeyed him. Running across the room she knelt down at her mother's knee and tried to encircle her with her arms, but Annie shivered in spite of herself and her face was cold as she touched Alberta with a perfunctory kiss.

"Please forgive me, mother, for being as I am!" said the child slyly. But a minute later she ran back to Reuben and hid her face on his shoulder. Thinking that his wife's coldness had repulsed her he took her in his arms with greater tenderness. She was trembling—but when she raised her face he saw to his surprise that it was with the laughter she was trying to disguise, and not with sorrow.

"You little rogue!" he whispered, but for the moment it troubled him that she had not taken it more to heart. He wished, the simple man, that his wife and child had more in common, but it was plain that Alberta was no companion

for her mother and would sooner be with himself, and so he grew into the way of taking her about with him and training her more as if she had been a boy than a girl. She was a fearless rider, and he took her with him hunting, though women were fewer on the Moor in those days. The fogs and the bogs made it dangerous as it is to-day, but habitations were fewer and farther between. There was no railway, even to Princetown, and if wanderers on the Moor were lost in Winter they were lost indeed. Reuben told her never to lose sight of him, and to follow him during the run; but her wilfulness made her apt to trust to herself, and the more she knew the country the less she liked to be a mere follower, even of her father.

When she was about fourteen he had a fright of losing her, and that she might be wandering on the Moor all night. Hounds had been hunting slowly in the neighbourhood of Devil's Tor and towards afternoon they ran into a bank of fog that was upon them before the scattered field could keep touch with one another. Reuben looked for his girl, but she was nowhere near him though he had warned her not to ride recklessly, and as the fog thickened so that he could not see more than a yard before him he stopped his horse and began to shout for Bertie, hoping she might hear him though they could not see each other. There was no answer but the whistle of the wind which had begun to rise, though it only drifted the fog and did not disperse it; and walking his horse Sherell made his way over the trackless heather, troubled in heart.

He had pulled up somewhere above Beardon, for he had recognised the country before the blanket of fog wrapped him round, and hoping to strike the road to Two Bridges he went downwards, guiding his horse as best he might. Wherever the ground rose, he turned back, for a moor-man knows that if he can find a river in a fog it will sometime

lead him to a habitation, though only a shepherd's hut. He had been wandering about for an hour and the light was failing, when the fog lifted as suddenly as it had come on, and he found himself within ten yards of the road for which he had been looking, but which he had not suspected to be so near him.

Well pleased to find the hard surface under his horse's feet again he jogged on awhile, still anxious about his daughter, when suddenly he saw two figures coming towards him from the valley on his right, and his heart gave a throb of relief to recognise the cob which Alberta rode and to see that she was still safely in the saddle. She was leaning down and talking to a strange figure walking by the horse's side—a little old man, it seemed, so short or so bent that he was no taller than a boy, with ragged grey hair that blew about his face, for he had no hat on his head.

" Some Moorland farmer has found her and shown her the way," thought Reuben with relief, and turned across the heather once more to meet them. But as they passed through a gap in one of the stone walls that mark the country into cattle pens, the old man suddenly disappeared and Alberta came on alone. She was riding with unusual care and caution, and did not appear to see her father until he hailed her.

" You gave me a fright, Bertie. You should have kept closer to me and then you would not have lost your way in the fog. I shall not take you out hunting again unless you promise me that you will be more obedient."

She turned her face towards him as he spoke with unusual severity, and its brightness seemed to gleam through the wintry dusk. Her long golden hair, plaited in two tails to keep it tidy, caught a spark from the red gap in the clouds where the sinking sun had broken through, so that it sparkled like metal ; and her blue eyes danced with a light

as tricksy as a will-o'-the-wisp's. But she pursed her red lips together and promised nothing to Sherell's demand.

"Who was that old man who was with you?" he persisted, still sternly. "Was he showing you the way?"

"He found me in the fog," said Alberta at last. "And showed me a way I had never been before—round by Kneeset and to Cranmere Pool!"

"Cranmere? 'Tis the wildest part of the Moor, and few moor-men even have seen it! It lies miles from here."

"I know—it was a long way round."

"But how did you come in that direction, and why did that stranger take you so far if he knew the Moor?"

"He knows the Moor well, Father!"

"You should not go with those old moor-men, Alberta," said Sherell uneasily. "They are rough, and hardly civilised. He looked like some wild tribesman more than an English farmer."

"He is not a farmer," said the girl in a lower voice. There was something odd about her even to Reuben's matter-of-fact acceptance of her personality and his familiarity with her unlikeness to other children. It struck a little chill to his heart even while he chided her as his accepted daughter.

"Who was he?" he asked shortly.

"He is a wise old man. He told me many things I should know about the Moor, and showed me that it has no dangers for me—it is my home as it is his!" cried the girl exultantly. "The dark pool is my heritage as the Tors were my cradle. We rode and walked and I was not tired. I shall never forget. But my horse is tired—I will lead him the rest of the way."

She slipped out of the saddle and turning the bridle over the cob's head strode lightly over the road which they had regained, as if she had just started. Glancing at the cob

Sherell saw that what she said was true. He was indeed dead beat and stumbled even without the girl on his back. Alberta patted and encouraged him, but she would not mount again and walked the long miles still before them on foot, though Sherell was glad enough to ride.

He did not tell his wife of the day's happenings, or of the girl's being lost in the fog and coming back to him with the little grey old man. It was no doubt a moor-man, so old and bent that he looked like some unearthly creature of the Moor; but though Reuben Sherell could explain it to himself he could not explain his own uneasiness, and he dreaded the suspicion in Annie's eyes if she knew. She had never "taken to" the child since that January evening when she had the strange delusion that it was not her own, and though she had gradually grown resigned to the alteration in Alberta, the health and strength that seemed to Reuben only a natural and satisfactory development, the mother had grown duller and aged more quickly as the child became brighter and livelier. Annie was not yet forty; but she looked ten years older. It was as if the girl were drawing her mother's vitality to feed her own veins, alienated though they were.

"When Bertie marries, and gets a little one of her own, the mother will come round and love her grandchild," thought Reuben hopefully. His daughter had no lack of suitors despite her indifference to them, for her beauty and her spirit could not fail to draw them to her. The young men in all the scattered district made sheepish excuses to call at Buckland, and never had Reuben found himself so popular as when Alberta had reached her eighteenth year. They came over from distant farms and vils to know if some of their cattle or ponies had strayed to Buckland, and were full of apologies for the possible trespass, to the surveyor; and at the drifts they hovered

round him with information as to his own beasts which had not been rounded up to number, and offered attentions to Miss Sherell, who accompanied her father. It was wonderful how many ponies seemed to wander to Buckland, as if it were a magnet and they needles, after Alberta was grown from a beautiful child to a still more beautiful girl. But she laughed in their owners' faces, just as she had done as a child, save that she did not now cuff them outright.

There was one that would not be driven away, though his suit prospered no more than the rest. His name was Robert Ollesbrom, and though still a young man he was one of substance and able to marry. His father had left him a farm and venville rights, and he throve with his ponies and the rough cattle of the Moor. He was the most eligible bachelor within range of the forest, aye and farther than Dartmoor to the in-country, and if Reuben Sherell had favoured any as a husband for his girl it would have been Ollesbrom. But he was loth to part from her even had she been willing ; and when he talked of the matter with his wife Annie shook her head.

"Better let well alone, Reuben. The maid is not one to marry."

"She will be sure to marry one day, pretty as she is !" said the father fondly. "When she stood in the stack-yard to-day and the sun caught her hair, it glinted like real gold."

"Aye !" said Annie with a smile that twisted her lips. "Did you ever see another maid with hair like hers ?"

"Indeed, I never did !" Reuben admitted proudly.

"Nor I. There be fair-haired girls enough, and some children with curls that are all but yellow—they darken later, though. But Alberta's hair is so bright it fairly glitters !"

"And catches the young men's hearts in it like a snare," chuckled Sherell with unusual imagination.

"Beware of that snare. Have you ever seen eyes like

hers—so blue as to be like blue flame? Often when I sit by the fire and see the coals burn blue I seem to be looking at Alberta's eyes! And her skin is fairer and softer than any other, though she should be sunburnt and freckled with the outdoor life she leads. Beware of that beauty. If a man ever takes her to his hearth she will bring him strange company!"

"Come, come, Mother, don't be unjust to the girl! She's a bit of a rogue, but the man that gets her will have something to be proud of," said Sherell stoutly. "Ollesbrom is fascinated with her. He hangs about the place like a man spellbound."

"I think he is indeed!" said Annie Sherell with a haggard look in her face.

She liked young Ollesbrom, and would have been pleased to see him married to her daughter—had it been other than Alberta. Her thoughts reverted, even after all these years, to the child that she had thought to rear, the Tiny of her dreams. She saw her as a gentle, natural girl, happy in her first love, coming to confide in her mother even while she declared that she was not to be had for the asking, that there were other young men besides Robert—as girls will. Mrs. Sherell could have understood such caprice and petted and advised the daughter who would have been her second self; but she was afraid of Alberta, her strange moods and her wild freedom from restraint. She would never be a submissive wife, content to rule her household and to lose her own identity in husband and children. It would be like marrying a fairy (and she shuddered as she thought the words) rather than a mortal maiden.

Yet as the year advanced it seemed that Alberta's nature became softer and more human than before. One Spring evening Mr. Sherell saw her steal out to the porch and stand amongst the old-fashioned pinks and stocks

that made the night odorous, down by the hedge where she herself had waited for Reuben eighteen years before. Somebody was on the other side of the hedge, and the murmur of voices came up to the older woman's sharpened ears where she stood at the open casement of the parlour. It was Robert Ollesbrom, who had ridden five miles for the chance of this meeting, and Annie's heart burnt with strange jealousy as if her own daughter's lover were being stolen by the stranger in her place. She could not hear what they said, but at last she could bear it no more and called sharply to the vague outlines in the garden:

"Alberta! who is that down by the gate?"

"It is only Mr. Ollesbrom, Mother," said Alberta's mocking voice. "He has brought me some *heartsease* to plant out for Summer."

"Ask him to come up to the house, then. You should not stand there talking like the maids!"

"You are to come in," said Alberta laughing. "Mother says it is like Jane and her sweetheart, and hardly respectable!"

The young man's murmured answer was probably that he wished nothing better, but he opened the gate and came up between the box-edged beds to the porch, where both he and Alberta paused. Mrs. Sherell's listening body stiffened, and she made a silent gesture of protest as she sensed their nearing faces. If they kissed she felt that some spell was begun—or ended. She heard her own voice, querulous, like an old woman's, breaking in on the moment of peril.

"Come in—come in at once. What are you waiting for?"

It seemed as if a sigh passed into the room from the sweets of the garden. The enchantment passed. There was a noise as of someone flinging the door wider, and Alberta came into the room followed by Robert. In his eyes Annie Sherell saw the thwarted anger of a drunkard

from whom someone has snatched the poison he thirsts for. He looked wilder and more unruly than she had ever seen him, and his greeting to her was absent and constrained.

"But I have saved him!" she thought.

The evening passed in fitful talk and dull silences that made sociability a failure. Ollesbrom did not try to make himself agreeable as usual, and left early, making his homeward ride an excuse. Reuben Sherell was away from home, as it chanced, and would not be back for a day or so. There was no excuse for the young man to linger, but Annie knew that he would have done so but for her intervention when they were in the porch. When he left he asked Alberta to light him to the gate, with a last desperate appeal in his eyes; but her softer mood seemed to have given way to perversity, and she refused.

"The boy who brings your horse has a lantern," she said carelessly. "And if you stumble between the porch and the gate Mother will think that you are drunk!"

"Hush, Alberta!" said Annie, scandalised. "Will you not mount in the yard, Robert? It is safer."

He thanked her stiffly, and went out by the side door with no further farewell to the wilful girl, who made a mocking face at his back.

"Bob is angry!" she said as his horse's feet sounded on the roadway and died into distance.

"Any man might be at your rudeness."

"It was not I who angered him, but you!" said Alberta, turning her shining eyes suddenly on the older woman. "He lost his temper in the porch, and lost something else as well. But it is over—you need not fear. An hour lost never returns,—though dearer things may do so!"

"What do you mean, you strange girl?"

"You will see—you will see. I feel my destiny to-night closing me round. It was beating its wings in the garden—

it came with me to the door of this house—but it could not pass your threshold a second time. It waits me there, out on the Moor." And she actually raised her arms as if she would drive something from her, so that Annie looked at her with fear as if she might herself see spectral wings.

"I frighten you," Alberta said in a quieter tone. "I shall not frighten you much longer. Good night, Mother! Heigh-ho! I wish my father were at home."

* * * * *

It was in the same year that the railway was opened at Princetown, following much the same route as the old tram-lines. Dwellers on the Moor went up from all sides to see the new wonder, for it seemed as if civilisation were at last invading the stronghold of Nature, and Reuben Sherell promised his wife and daughter to take them also. But at the last minute he was prevented by news of a forest fire that took him in hot haste to Hexworthy; and as he would not disappoint his womenkind he sent them in the new dog-cart, which had taken the place of the old gig, to Walkhampton, where they "boarded" the train. He deputed the steadiest of his men to drive them, for the road even as late as the '80's was none of the best, and warned him that on no account was he to allow Miss Alberta to take the reins. But the girl for once showed no inclination to disobey commands, and sat quietly enough at the back of the cart with an expression of faint disdain on her scarlet, sucked-in under-lip, as if she were at variance with the advance of civilisation on the wild desolation she had always known. And when they reached the little new station and the farm-man's wonder and excitement burst from him in broad Devon, all that Alberta said was, "There is no taming the Moor. They may make roads and railways as they will, but it will keep to itself as it has from the beginning!"

"It brings it more in touch with the towns," said city-bred Annie Sherell. "One does not feel so cut off like!"

Alberta laughed scornfully. "It only goes as far as Princetown," she said. "You would be cut off again at Two Bridges and Wistman's Wood, aye! and far enough away at Post Bridge and Cranmere!"

"We are not going there," said Mrs. Sherell shortly.

Yet after they had taken the wonderful journey to Princetown and had had some lunch, she was persuaded to take seats in a wagonette that was running out to Two Bridges with some of the excursionists. There was plenty of time before they need be at the station again for the return journey, and she was seized with a restless desire to go on a little farther—she who had so seldom ventured far into the forest. All Annie's jaunts had been to towns, to Plymouth and Tavistock and Exeter, for always there was the remote hope in her heart of hearing mention of Gipsy Dale, though with the course of years it had become almost as much of a myth to her as to her husband. It had all happened so long ago that her frenzy had gradually numbed to despair, though she never could regard the strange girl with her as flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone.

At Two Bridges the wagonette unloaded such of its passengers as wished to climb up to Wistman's Wood, and took others on as far as Prince Hall. Mrs. Sherell and Alberta were amongst the former, but instead of climbing up the difficult rocky pass with its stunted oak-trees growing between the boulders, they turned aside as by common consent and made their way along the walls of the Newtake and into some of the enclosures through the "gates" or gaps in the stone. The month was May, and the elastic sense of it was in the air as well as in the springy turf underfoot. The two women walked in silence, each seemingly absorbed in her own thoughts; but they had

wandered some way on their aimless ramble when they came, rather suddenly, upon what had once been a human habitation. It was nothing more than a ruined hut, and looked dilapidated enough to be the resort of foxes rather than mankind; but almost beside its old doorway a little spring burst out of the rock on which it was built and trickled down the hillside to join the river below.

"I should like a drink of that water, I'm so thirsty," said Mrs. Sherell longingly. "It looks nice and clear and I can make a cup of my hands."

Alberta did not answer, and she fell a little behind her mother with a lagging step as Mrs. Sherell turned aside to reach the spring. As she did so she saw that there was an old blanket or rug hung up as a screen in the gaping doorway, and at the same moment a girl came from behind the crazy building with a pail in her hand and stooped to fill it at the spring. She was barefooted, and her clothes consisted of one loose garment girt in at the waist and so discoloured by weather that it was impossible to tell its original shade or material. She wore no hat, and her arms were burnt brown by exposure; but she had originally been a fair woman to judge from her tangled hair—too fair for a gipsy lass, which was Mrs. Sherell's first thought and caused her to recoil instinctively. As the girl raised her head again from filling the pail she looked up at Annie with the shyness of some wild animal which seldom sees humanity, but Mrs. Sherell uttered a loud cry—the echo of one that she had given eighteen years back—and rushing forward seized the girl by her arm.

"Who are you? Who are you?" she said wildly. "How did you come here? Oh, it is—it must be—the dead restored! The very same as I looked at her age, despite the rags—my own child——"

The girl's face had little intelligence in it save terror.

She tried to free herself and run, but the frantic woman held her fast and her cries brought a new figure upon the scene. The covering of the doorway was put aside by a brown knotted hand, and suddenly in the aperture stood the gaunt figure of Gipsy Dale.

Her dark hair had grown grey and fluttered about her lined face, but there was no mistaking her height and the glittering slanting eyes as full of fire as of old. She stood pointing at Annie and the girl and laughing all over her wicked withered face.

"So your trapassings after us have ended here, and you've found her again!" she jeered. "Is this your baby, your fair little child, you think? Fie, Mrs. Sherell! to take a slut like that to your arms when you have such a fine beautiful daughter!" She turned swiftly and maliciously and pointed to Alberta, standing a few feet away in all the glory of her youth and the new Spring gown she wore. A greater contrast to the poor ragged figure than Annie was clinging to could hardly have been seen; but the mother did not heed her,—she was coaxing and fondling the silent stranger as if she were still a little child.

"My Tiny—my own!—come away with me, my darling, and I will take you home and teach and cherish you." Then as the girl made no response she turned upon the gipsy with savage anger. "What have you done to her?" she demanded. "Have you made her an idiot with ill-treatment and hardship? I'll have the law of you yet, you vile woman! You stole my child—you can't deny it—and left that other in her place."

"Fair and softly, Mrs. Sherell, as I warned you once before!" said the vagrant in her deep and warning voice. "You can prove nothing—your daughter has grown up in your house, acknowledged by all the world. This wench of mine is nought to you," She fixed her taunting eyes

on the poor woman who was clinging to the silent ragged figure, and something like contempt altered her manner.

"A fine exchange you would make, Mrs. Sherell, and what will your husband say to losing his beauty and gaining such a rough ragged daughter instead? Why, all the Moor has heard of Miss Sherell and her fair face!" She looked for the first time, it seemed, full at Alberta, standing out in the sunlight, a little apart, and for all her boldness there was something that was almost like fear in her eyes, a hesitation, a shrinking, as if she recognised a darker power than her own.

"Do what you will—say what you will—but let me have this one!" said Annie Sherell, maddened with the fear of losing what she had hardly regained. "Give her to me—however you have ill-treated her, I will bring her back to health of mind and body. She can live as a servant in my house—but I know that she is my flesh and blood and not that other!"

"You fool!" Mrs. Dale spoke suddenly, as if her scorn of Annie Sherell were too deep for her to hold her words any longer. "Don't you see that I have done you a good turn, whether I would or no? You would never have reared her—she was sickly with your nursing and would have pined and died in some childish sickness. But I fed her on the rough winds of the Moor, and hardened her to work and the open sky. She could learn little—she had not the strength for mind and body too, but she has health which you could never have given her and she is as clean-living as any maiden you could bring up." She flung out her arms with a dramatic gesture of bestowing a gift. "Take her, Annie Sherell. I have done with her. Bertha, you go with this lady and do as she bids you."

Annie held the girl's brown hard hand tight between her own, and only loosed it to put her own cloak over the ragged dress. She was trembling all over, and in such haste to

be gone that she hardly uttered another word to Gipsy Dale until she was hurrying away with the silent Bertha, who seemed mazed. But she remembered Reuben Sherell, and the extraordinary explanation she would have to make him, and half turned back.

"And—that other—your own child?" she said.

"No child of mine!" said Gipsy Dale hastily. "I found her on the Moor—a naked babe, left there by Those to whom she belongs. She will go back to them—never fear. See!—she has gone already!"

Mrs. Sherell, staring round her at the enclosures and the sloping hillside, saw that it was true. There was no sign of Alberta. She had vanished as if the Moor had yawned beneath her and swallowed her alive, and Annie Sherell shivered in the warm May sunshine as if something supernatural had touched her.

"She has gone into the cottage," she muttered. "They were in league,—or else she has run on before and will meet us at Two Bridges."

She left the lonely spot which to her was still full of danger since Gipsy Dale had camped there, and hurried her bewildered charge along, finding her way back by instinct, for in coming she had trusted to Alberta. She saw nothing of the latter, and by the time she and Bertha reached Two Bridges the wagonette had started on its way to Princetown. Mrs. Sherell was able to hire a cart, however, after some delay, and drove straight to the railway, where she still half hoped and half dreaded to see the false Alberta awaiting her. There was no trace of her, though Annie thought that some folk who had been in the wagonette with them looked curiously at her and her different companion, and one woman who knew her slightly asked if Miss Sherell were not returning with her?

"She has gone to stay with friends of hers!" said Annie

ominously, and guided the Bertha of Gipsy Dale's hut to an empty compartment which was fortunately left to them for the return journey. She had not had time to get either shoes or headgear for the girl, whose tangled fair hair hung loose about her freckled face; but Annie fastened the cloak more firmly over her rags, and tied her own veil over the rough head, the girl still submitting as if stunned. She did not, however, show any terror of the railway as Mrs. Sherell had half feared, and on being questioned as to whether she had ever been on one before she said Yes, Mrs. Dale had taken her by train once or twice when it was too far to tramp from county to county.

"You did not call her mother?" said Annie jealously. "She did not say she was your mother?"

"No, ma'am—she always telled me call her Missus Dale."

"Told you to call her so," said Annie gently—as gently as she had not spoken for eighteen years. "Say 'She told me,' Tiny dear—not 'telled me.'" It was the first of many, many patient lessons.

The only time that the girl spoke voluntarily was when the train halted at Walkhampton and they got out on to the platform. Then she said, "Where be takin' of me?" with the pathetic meekness of some animal.

"We are going home," said Annie with a little sob. "I am taking you back to the home from which you were stolen from me—and oh, I will be so loving and gentle to you, my poor lost darling! I will make up to you all you have missed, and you will learn to be all that you ought to have been these dreadful years!"

The girl did not answer, did not seem to understand; but she looked at Annie with wistful eyes the counterpart of her own. With her hair tidily covered, and wrapped decently in her cloak, the likeness between them was extraordinary. Even the farm-man who drove them back

to Buckland Spiney looked from one face to the other curiously when Mrs. Sherell told him curtly that Miss Alberta was gone to friends, and the girl with her was coming to stay at Buckland in the meantime.

" She hev' got her real one back ! " was in his wondering mind, but he said no word of his revelation until he was amongst his own kind in the kitchen at Buckland.

The moment when her husband must return was Annie's crisis, and the signal for her to fight for her rights in the daughter she had regained. She knew that even if she could force him to admit her own conviction, and told him of Gipsy Dale's confession, it would still be a blow to him. He would not give up Bertie without a struggle. He had loved her in spite of her strangeness and the something in her that had attracted and repelled at the same time,—even Robert Ollesbrom. Mrs. Sherell expected that Reuben would want to keep the changeling even if he must acknowledge his real child, and would reproach her for having let Bertie go. He might even make search for her on the Moor. But a certainty was in Annie's mind that he would never find her—with a prickle of the skin she sensed that the creature who had lived under their roof for eighteen years had gone back to companions of whom they knew nothing, and to an existence that was no longer mortal.

Reuben Sherell was late in returning, so late that her agitation about her daughter became anxiety about her husband in Annie's mind. When she heard his step at last in the garden it seemed to her that he came slowly and his foot dragged. She went to meet him in the porch, her body trembling with excitement, and in the May evening she saw his face like a pale mask, ghastly with an experience she could not fathom.

" Let me come in, wife," he said hoarsely. " There is no need to tell me. I have seen her ! "

"She whom we called Bertie?" Already it was in the past.

"She came to me at Hexworthy, and told me things I cannot speak of—things I could not have believed. She is not of us—she has gone back to Those who left her on the Moor!"

"You know, then,—you know that we have regained our real daughter? You believe me at last?"

"I must!" said the man with a groan. He threw up his arms suddenly and burst into bitter sobbing. "But I loved her—she has been as my own flesh and blood for eighteen years. And she told me that because I had loved her I had almost made her as—as we are." He spoke fearfully, below his breath. "Wife, if you could have loved her too we might have gained for her a human heart and soul!"

Annie trembled, but she said no word to his reproach. She was awed at what he had undergone, though she hardly knew what it was. She wound her arms round him and comforted him as she had done her recovered Tiny, for she knew no better way of curing sorrow. But in her heart she felt as if a dark load of trouble had been lifted from her by that last strange meeting.

* * * * *

As time went on it seemed that even Reuben Sherell was reconciled to the exchange of the false daughter for the real, and the mystery somehow vanished like the wreathing fog before the actual presence of the real Alberta. She was so gentle and tractable that she learned easily from Annie's tireless teaching, and though she could do little more than read and write—which Gipsy Dale had taught her despite her boast to the contrary—she learned to sew and cook and to speak "nicely" in a very short time. She was not beautiful as the fairy child had been,

but when her skin lost its wild brown and grew soft and fine she was a pretty, fair girl with timid eyes that seemed to appeal for patience with her ignorance and backwardness. One thing she retained that she had not had as a babe—a strength and health that made her able to help her mother as her foster-sister had never deigned to do. Probably the gipsy was telling the truth when she said that the child would never have been aught but sickly in Annie's fostering care, if she had lived at all; it was the open-air life on the Moor that had hardened her and saved her.

But the real change was in Annie Sherell, who with her daughter restored to her seemed to have regained her lost youth. She had been stricken an old woman at five and twenty, but she became a young one at forty-three, and looked years younger than her still stalwart husband. She sang and laughed again as if to show Alberta how to do so, and dressed prettily, if in a matronly way, to encourage the girl to do the same. When Robert Ollesbrom came again to Buckland after a year's absence he found a gracious hostess whose ready talk filled in the silence of her shy daughter, and was more bewildered by the older woman's charm and pleasant manner than by the exchange of the girls of which he had heard a garbled account. "Bertie" had gone back to her own people—that was all he knew—and the strange story of kidnapping by gipsies did not seem to him so wild a tale as it would have done to a "foreigner." There were queer happenings on the Moor, and the far scattered dwellings made romance more possible. The fascination that had possessed him became to him almost an evil thing, and his wounded heart found healing in the presence of the timid girl who hardly raised her eyes to his face while he talked to Mrs. Sherell, but who seemed to listen. . . .

So the vivid, breathing personality of that other who

had grown up at Buckland Spiney faded from it like a dream, or as if she had never been. Mrs. Sherell hardly alluded to her save to answer a neighbour's curious question, that Bertie had gone to friends of her own,—the real Alberta could have no knowledge of her substitute, save what her mother briefly told her,—and Reuben never spoke of her at all. It was a mystery which the Sherells lived down as they might have lived down a disgrace, their lonely situation and narrow social circle helping them. Of the whole household the master seemed to shrink the most from the mention of Bertie's name after his last strange meeting with her when she had sought him at Hexworthy. He never confided more of that meeting even to his wife; but though he was the same downright, unimaginative man as of yore, there was the shadow of a trouble in his honest eyes at times, like that of a child who has been told of things beyond its understanding.

When the Spring came round again, Alberta had been nearly a year restored to her mother. It was not such a May as last year, but rough and blustering weather that seemed as if Winter still struggled to maintain its grip of the year. The season was so late, indeed, that a drift of the ponies took place on the anniversary of the day when Mrs. Sherell had gone to Princetown, and Reuben had to face as inclement a morning on the Moor as if it had been early March. Hailstorms broke up the fitful sunshine at intervals, and cut the young leaves of the plantations as cruelly as if they were threshed through, and Reuben was not sorry when the drift was over, and he could turn his horse's head homewards.

He had lunched at Walkhampton, in which direction his duties had taken him, and in the early afternoon was riding over the Moor on his way back to Buckland Spiney, though he was many miles off as yet, when he came to

a piece of wooded land that he did not remember to have passed through on his way up. The track he was taking led through it, however, and Reuben followed it, thankful that the weather had improved, and that the sun seemed inclined to shine more steadily. He was noticing how backward the trees were compared to last year, and how young the leafage was, when he became aware of music in the wood. It was not the birds, nor was it a human voice—it sounded to him like musical instruments playing together in sweet harmony, but the utter impossibility of such a thing in that situation did not at first strike him. It was so tangible and so plain that there was nothing unearthly about it. Yet when he looked backwards and forwards, on either side through the trees, and even overhead, there was not the least sign of any human being but himself. There was not sufficient foliage, either, or undergrowth, to have hidden a single player, let alone an orchestra; yet the music continued, now softer and now louder, all the way through the wood, and he only lost it when he emerged again upon the open Moor. The curious part was that it was only when it ceased that it began to strike him as unnatural, and he pushed his horse on faster as well as he could for the rough ground before him.

He was descending the side of the hill on which was the wood, and saw before him a narrow road between banks topped with loose hedges, on the other side of which was grazing land. Still he did not recognise the country, well as he knew the Moor, and thought that the farmers must have taken in more land for their pasturage and cultivated it since he had last been in this direction. He must surely now come to a house or some landmark that he would recognise, and he turned his horse's head from the Moor and scrambled down a bit of rough land through a gateway into the road, breaking into a trot as soon as he

was on firmer ground. He was jogging on, when at a bend of the road he saw something that made him pull up and stare with all his eyes.

Across the road, not twenty yards away from him, ran a large dog fox, who was up the opposite bank and through the hedge before Reuben could cry "Tally-ho!" as he felt inclined on the spur of the moment. That was not unusual, for foxes frequently cross a lonely road on the Moor; but scarcely a minute after him came a pack of hounds who were so keen on his line that they seemed to Reuben to be running from scent to view in the next field. They were not the Dartmoor pack that he knew so well, for he could identify those hounds almost as well as the huntsman. These were a strange pack to him—heavier and larger, almost like stag-hounds,—he thought they were slower too in pace. But before he could recover from his first surprise his breath was finally taken away by what followed the hounds. In the month of May—when even hunting on the Moor had stopped, though they had killed a May fox somewhat earlier—in broad daylight and a sunny afternoon, came a field behind the fox and hounds surely never seen before! A stout horse rose the bank on the left, crashed through the hedge, jumped into the road, and taking the opposite bank gallantly disappeared after the pack—and his rider was a shaven-pated monk in gown and cowl with his sandalled feet thrust far through the stirrup irons! He was followed by another and another, all bold riders and well mounted, with one amongst them whom Sherell distinguished, even in his bewilderment, as the Abbot. The sound of the horses' feet landing in the road and crumbling the farther bank, the creaking of the saddle leather, the rush of the whole field, was quite distinct on the quiet afternoon. Then they were gone through the hedge and out of sight, and Reuben

was left alone on the road, soothing his horse mechanically and telling himself that some mad fellows had surely dressed up and got a pack of hounds in cry for a wager. But somehow he did not think so. His horse's pricked ears and quivering body might be only excitement at the hunt; but the thing, real though it had been, was becoming *un*real to Reuben's usually commonplace mind. The whole hunt had occurred too suddenly, and vanished through the hedge without coming into view again across the fields. He recalled something also, at which he had often laughed as at a folk-tale—a story told by an old man at Walkhampton who said that his brother, some forty years ago, had seen the Abbot and monks from Tavistock ride across country after a fox in broad day in the summer! The apparition was said to appear at intervals, but with long years between. It was absurd, of course. Only, Reuben Sherell had just seen it!

He pulled his startled horse together and forced him into a trot over the haunted road, still trying to find out where he was and to remember—reluctantly—the neighbourhood in which the Monks' Hunt was said to ride. He had an idea that it was in an opposite direction to that in which he desired to go, but he knew that he had started out right from Walkhampton, and until he heard the music in the wood he had been heading straight for home. He must have missed his track on the Moor—which was unprecedented for Reuben Sherell—but now that he was on a road he could not miss it again.

He had not come on a single habitation when he saw suddenly the familiar outline of Buckland Tor on the horizon. He could not lose the track now, and he turned off the road again towards the rising ground, wondering from which direction he was approaching the Tor. It did not matter, now that he had a landmark to steer by;

but the Tor was farther than he supposed, and the day had once more clouded over. It grew so dark that the Spring evening seemed almost like night, and a fresh hailstorm drove in his face as he approached nearer to the frowning height. He must be somewhere near Buckland Spiney itself, or he should be . . . and then before he could avoid it he found that his horse and himself were floundering in the peat and water of a deep bog and sinking so rapidly that he had hardly time to slip out of the saddle before the poor brute was in up to the girths.

To do him justice Reuben's first thought was for his horse, and hampered though he was himself he tried by every encouragement and aid to help the animal to struggle back to safe ground. How they had managed to get into a bog where no bog ought to be he could not tell, but he was sweating and shivering as much as his horse while they plunged deeper and deeper. He thought with despair that the outline so like Buckland Tor must be something far different, and he was right. For the first time in his life Reuben Sherell was Pixy-led.

There came a moment when if he did not abandon his horse he must be sucked in himself, and the tears rose to his eyes as he thought of poor Carlos being so ignominiously drowned after many a hard day's hunt over the worst of the Moor. He looked round him in the dusk for sign of help, and shouted . . . and then, as if risen out of the bog itself, he perceived a figure coming lightly over the treacherous ground—so lightly that its feet seemed as buoyant as on a good hard road. As it approached he saw that it was a woman, for her light summer skirts fluttered about her, and there was no hat on her head to conceal the gleam of her loose golden hair. Someone was coming to his rescue—someone he knew well, for no other hair was ever so bright or eyes so brilliant a blue. Before he could gasp with fear

or relief Bertie's strong hand had caught the horse's bridle, and with her word of command it seemed that she almost lifted him out of the bog and pulled him round to safety. Reuben followed her, wading up to his knees, and dropped exhausted on the firmer ground at her feet while she soothed and quieted the trembling horse.

"Bertie!" said the man in a low voice. "You!—where did you come from? I was nearly lost, and Carlos too, poor brute, in the Stables!"

"You should have called for help sooner—Father!" said the girl, laying her hand tenderly on his shoulder. "Have no fear—I will set you on the right track. And when you are in danger on the Moor do not doubt but that I will come to you!"

He looked at her with troubled eyes in which dread and affection were mingled. But the simplicity of his nature still saw in her the daughter he had loved, and though he asked no questions of her he accepted her help as if their relations were unchanged."

"Where are we, my girl?" he said as he eased the horse's girths. "I cannot mount him—he is fair done. We must walk a mile or so."

"'Tis near to Two Bridges—you must put up a while there."

"Two Bridges! And I should have been well on my way to Buckland Tor."

A clear laugh like silver bells came from the girl's lips. She slipped the horse's bridle over her arm, and with the other helped Sherell to rise and walk with her. She seemed as fresh and strong and vital as any mortal maid, and yet he had seen her cross the bog on fairy feet that never sank or stumbled!

Walking slowly, for both man and horse were exhausted, she led them by a way that Reuben's confused brain could

never recollect, until they were approaching the bed of a river, and there she paused.

"Follow the stream, and it will lead you down," she said. "I must go to my friends. Look! we are at Wistman's Wood."

Reuben looked, scarcely believing his eyes, and there above them were the stunted oaks growing amongst the huge boulders, and covered with lichens that made them glimmer in the dusk. But there was something more there —amongst the dwarf trees were little grey men such as he had seen with Bertie on the day when he lost her in the fog. Some of them were seated, brow on hand, and some of them stood; but the whole wood was alive with them.

"These are the Wisemen of the wood!" she said. "And mine own people. Good-night, dear human creature who has loved me, and whom I have loved. Here is a cold kiss for her who never was my mother—here is a kiss for good luck to her who is my other self, my sister—and here is one for you, whose daughter I might have been." Her cold lips clung to his face for once; they touched him more kindly for twice; but the third time they were warm and tender as a mortal maiden's, and her white arms were round his neck as they had been many a time. Then her dress fluttered amongst the boulders and the stunted oaks, and it seemed that the little Wistmen or Wisemen of the Wood rose up to welcome her.

But Reuben Sherell found himself and his weary horse stumbling down the track to Two Bridges, and he saw her no more. . . .

VII

THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

"But surely it is very unusual?" said Mr. Buller as they went upwards and the floors swung past them. He spoke briefly, without elaboration of his sentences, as if his words were as valuable as his time, and looked hard at his companion with what seemed an habitual doubt of his fellow-creatures rather than suspicion of him as an agent for, and valuer of, antiques. Isaac Morris was obviously Jewish before one knew his name; but his face was the cultivated type of a highly civilised race, and not that of the class which has been debased into cunning or crime. He did not answer Mr. Buller, save with his pursed-up lips, until the lift stopped and they stepped out on an upper landing; and it was not until the lift man had clanged the gate and was descending, that he turned a little eagerly to the millionaire financier.

"It *is* unusual, Mr. Buller—I was as surprised as you are. But Mr. William Wiley had been the Secretary to the Economic for very many years, and had occupied these same rooms until they were regarded as more his than the Company's."

"Was he allowed to furnish them throughout, to his own taste?"

"Oh no—you will see that the furniture is the usual office type—nothing out of the common there. It was his own hobby to pick up a picture here and there, and to lodge it at the office, until he came to have this unique little collection. The Directors did not mind, even took a friendly interest in the things, and it was from one of

them—a customer of ours—that I heard of their being here."

As he spoke the agent preceded his companion across a landing and a few steps down a passage, where he stopped before a door in no way distinguished from others save that it had the word "Private" on it, and a black arrow pointing inquirers to farther rooms on the right.

"This is Mr. Wiley's room—the caretaker was to have met us," said Morris fussily. He seemed almost nervous, as if he were afraid of his patron and excited at the same time, and he looked down the passage as if irresolute and called "Hi there!" to the silent premises.

"Are these offices empty?" asked Mr. Buller abruptly.

"Yes—the Company was just moving into others on a lower floor when Mr. Wiley's death occurred so unexpectedly. Their lease not being up they very considerately closed his rooms until some arrangement—Oh, there you are at last!"

The slow steps of an elderly woman sounded along the empty passage, and the caretaker appeared from the opposite direction to that in which Morris had looked for her. She was a depressed-looking person with a harassed face and scanty hair, and she carried two or three keys with her which she offered to the Jew.

"That's Mr. Wiley's room, sir," she said in a flat voice. "Were you wanting to see the other offices as well?"

"No thanks, Mrs. Hobbs—it's only Mr. Wiley's own room. Which is the key?"

"It isn't locked," said the woman unexpectedly. "There's another gentleman come to see his things—he's in there now."

The agent's annoyance was so genuine and so sudden that he almost swore, and for the first time a glimmer of amusement crossed the solid face of the millionaire.

"An earlier bird!" he said dryly.

"Why did you let him in? Who is he?" demanded Morris with his hand on the door. He spoke so sharply that the caretaker seemed to shrink and collapse into herself, and her face had the easily scared look of a person always afraid of ill-fortune and ill-usage.

"I had orders to show Mr. Wiley's rooms to gentlemen, sir, from the Board," she said falteringly. "I didn't know who was coming, and the gentleman said he was from some paper."

"Pressman!" muttered the Jew, catching his sensitive underlip between his fine teeth. "Curse these journalists—got wind of it somehow. Never mind—can't be helped now. Come in, Mr. Buller."

He opened the door, and stood aside for the rich man to pass in first without looking to see who was the person who had forestalled them; and in that order they walked into the room.

It was an ordinary office-room, like many others in the building, which was one of those valuable sites in the City of London parcelled out to several businesses. The ground floor was a wholesale button manufacturer's whose store-rooms also occupied some of the upper floors, and the intermediate ones had harboured the Economic Assurance Company (of which the late Mr. Wiley had been Secretary for so many years) and other firms no less prosaic. Mr. Wiley's room looked out at the back of the high building upon the backs of many others all devoted to the same purposes, but more particularly to wholesale trades; so that, glancing out of the one wide window, Mr. Buller saw boxes and bales filling the frames of similar windows on floors up and down and round about, but as it chanced no other sign of life. Mr. Wiley had been both remote and retired in his work, and since his Company had evacuated

the premises a sense of being derelict seemed to have fallen upon them despite the seething business of the locality.

Mr. Buller stood at the window, looking out, and paying no attention to the man already in possession, or the pictures which he had been brought there to inspect, after his first inclusive glance. He seemed as little concerned with them as with the roll-topped desk, the well-worn leather chairs, the reference files, and the usual furnishings of an office. Yet they were sufficiently surprising to have caught the attention of a man who was not even a connoisseur; for hanging on the dim grey office walls were six or seven genuine works of art signed by names that fetch prices of four figures in a sale-room, the largest being an indubitable Constable whose warmth and richness seemed to flood the dull flat atmosphere with life. It was as beautiful as his Valley Farm, and was probably painted about the same period and in the same neighbourhood. Of the others, the most distinctive were a small Morland, and a Linnell that caught the eyes with the sunshine on a cornfield. All the pictures were of the British School. It seemed incredible that they could have been collected in this London office and all of them genuine; but the millionaire had never doubted after his first sweeping glance, for all his apparent indifference.

The Jewish expert had seen the pictures before, and satisfied himself of their value. His attention was free to concentrate itself on the man who had been before them, and his shrewd eyes were full of chagrin as he summed him up in his own mind.

"Reporter—off some provincial paper—just got his first job in London—nosing round after 'copy' and as keen as a ferret. Curse him!"

He judged rightly that the journalist was not a Londoner, and that he was anxious to disguise it with

an added assurance. He was looking at the pictures and making notes in shorthand when the newcomers entered, and he looked at them as suspiciously as Morris looked at him. His face was thin and rather common, and his clothes were not very new or well-made, but he had a pathetically "respectable" appearance to anyone who knew the rates of payment to a newspaper man who was on the lower rungs of the ladder. There was something almost jaunty in the self-assertion, covering an inward anxiety, with which he turned to Morris and pointed to the Constable.

"This is an unexpected thing to find here!" he said, but his eyes were sharp with uncertainty of his own knowledge. The Jew, a much cleverer man, saw his disadvantage at once.

"May I ask if you are a collector?" he said suavely.

"I'm here for the *Daily Rattle*," said the pressman, falling into the trap at once. "Do you know anything about the late owner, Mr. Wiley? I suppose the things are genuine? Do you know if they are left to the nation, now, or who his heirs are?"

"I understand that they will go to Christy's," said the Jew quietly.

"Ah!—not the nation? By order of his heirs, then?"

"I couldn't say, sir. I am only here to inspect."

"I should be much obliged if you'd give me an opinion, though!" said the journalist with touching confidence in the expert's good-fellowship. "If this is a genuine discovery of 'Old Masters,' y' know, it must be worth a fortune!"

The Jew, seeing him in fancy betraying the "discovery" in heavy type, would willingly have pushed him out of the window and watched him fall to the depth of those solid floors beneath them; but his anger was diverted

by another interruption and an increasing dismay to himself.

The old caretaker cautiously opened the door again and looked in with bleared apologetic eyes. "I don't know what to do, gentlemen," she said hoarsely. "It's a young laidy come now!" But before she could use her own person as a barricade in the doorway the last intruder had slipped past her and was in the room, looking round upon the three men with the inquiring eyes of an intelligent child, and faintly amused by the silent hostility in the reception she met.

"It's all right, Mrs. Hobbs—I'll wait," she said in a clear voice that belonged to another world to that of the Jew, or the journalist, or even of the millionaire. She was a tall girl with a face whose charm was partly its modernity, and partly the result of intense vitality and grip on life. If she had not been so modern she might have been a trifle awkward in the situation in which she found herself, or she might not have sparkled so obviously with humour and careless good-will. But her eyes, as she turned them from one man to the other, were utterly unconscious of herself and delightfully aware of them and their objection to her presence.

The caretaker was hurriedly withdrawing when some sense of exculpating herself made her put her head in at the door again with an explanation.

"She says she's come to meet her Ma!"

"It's all right," said the young lady again, with a nod which included the woman as well as the men. "Lady Bridgwater. She's coming here to see the pictures."

Her words had the effect of an electric shock on two of her hearers, so much so that they made an instinctive movement, if they did not actually jump. The Jew's fine artistic hands fastened on the back of an office chair with

spasmodic rage as if to hold himself in check, and his eyes narrowed in his characteristic face. Lady Bridgwater was the most notorious gambler in valuable antiques who ever opposed a "ring" of professional dealers—she was a terror and a danger, and the very last person to whom Morris would have wished Mr. Wiley's treasures to be known. But to the journalist she was pure "copy," a stunt of which he could never have dreamed in his wildest moments when sent out for his paper to report on the rumour of a newly discovered Constable in a City office. Even his provincial experience included the name of Lady Bridgwater as an outstanding figure in Society, and his excitement at her advent flared up in his hungry eyes. They devoured the girl, now half sitting on, half leaning against, Mr. Wiley's prosaic table.

"I hope you'll excuse my asking—but are you Lady Bridgwater's daughter?" said the pressman, sidling up to her. She turned those amused eyes on him, as if he were a curious new animal that had but just been introduced to her notice.

"Yes—I'm Elizabeth Egerton," she said simply. Then, the amusement deepening to a laugh in her eyes, she added, "The advent of my mother seems to have upset the gentleman with the nose!"

"It hasn't upset *me*!" gasped the journalist. "I'm delighted—delighted! I've wanted to see her for years—everybody knows her. My name's Welch—Alfred Welch. I'm on the *Daily Rattle*.

The Hon. Elizabeth Egerton might have been vaguely aware of a flimsy paper with coarse type which newsboys thrust upon her on occasions of some disaster that warranted a "Special," but otherwise her mind must have been a blank as to the *Daily Rattle*. She came of a family that did not read "rag" newspapers, however catholic

their taste. But her modernity rose above the social status of the *Daily Rattle's* latest reporter recruited from a provincial weekly, and as he promised novelty she turned to him with a good comradeship born of her age. "Well, Mr. Welch, I'm sure my mother will be awfully pleased to meet you. She adores the Press! She'll drag you all round the room and show you the pictures and tell you what she thinks about them—you won't get a platform for your own views, I warn you!"

"To tell the truth, Miss Egerton, I haven't any views—much. I know the look of a Constable, of course, but these things are so well faked nowadays, y' know. Tell me what *you* think about the canvases. You were at school last of any of us!"

It was at this point that Mr. Buller left the window and joined Morris in his inspection of the little collection round which the expert was hovering like a warder. "Come—we had better look at the things, if we are going to," he said. "I've got an appointment at my broker's at twelve."

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Buller," whispered Morris, as they turned their backs on the journalist and the girl. "You had better make a bid for the lot at once if you want them. This Press fellow and Lady Bridgwater coming on the scene together has pretty well settled it. The pictures are genuine, and they will never be sent to Christy's if her Ladyship sees them and the *Daily Rattle* blabs it all out! I wanted to get you in first, and I know Mr. Wiley's heirs would be glad to sell privately, but if it once gets about——"

The voices died into a murmur, and the two connoisseurs moved from one canvas to another with terse comments, while Betty Egerton leaned on the table awaiting her mother, and Alfred Welch, reporter on the *Daily Rattle*, stood beside her enjoying more of her vivacious society

than was accorded to one man in ten. Her propinquity excited him only in a lesser degree to Lady Bridgwater's, for she had been almost as much advertised. "The Hon. Betty Egerton's escapades" were a stunt in themselves! He wanted to ingratiate himself, but his only method was a nervous familiarity that made Miss Egerton intensely amused.

"D'you think the Constable's real stuff or a dud?" he said in a whisper, edging nearer to the girl as she lounged against Mr. Wiley's desk. "That Jew boy and the City blighter are sticking their noses into it as if it were cream cheese."

Betty Egerton choked on a laugh. "I don't know a thing about pictures," she said frankly. "But my mother would tell you with her eyes bandaged. Are you thinking of buying it?"

"Gee! no. I haven't the cash to bid for an oleo. I'm here to make a par out of it for the *Daily Rattle*."

Betty's quizzical eyes grew wider with interest. She had been taught to respect the Press and its loud-voiced power of notoriety. Her supple figure turned a little more towards Alfred Welch, and she began to talk to him as to a pal, leagued in some vague way against the two men who were inspecting the Constable, and whose broad and narrow backs were silently hostile. The journalist found Betty unexpectedly approachable and sympathetic. She almost giggled at his comments on the connoisseurs, and he almost nudged her to draw her attention as he would have done a girl in his own social circle. Her friendly eyes egged him on to admit that the *Daily Rattle* was his first London job, and that this meeting with Lady Bridgwater and the discovery of the picture meant a lot to him.

"I'm so sorry mother is late—she always is—but when

she comes she will give you all the copy you want!" Betty Egerton's red lips curled in a silent laugh of anticipation, and her voice was as confidential as Mr. Morris's whispers to his patron. It was curious that the four people so oddly brought together at the top of the City building divided themselves naturally into couples. They had drifted to opposite sides of the room when the door opened slowly again to admit the caretaker. She stood in the doorway as if her farther entrance were an intrusion.

"I'm sorry to trouble you," she said in a low, flat voice, "but it being Saturday the other Offices is going, and the man will be off the lift. If you don't mind walking down I can let you out——"

"I suppose the lift man can stay five minutes," said Morris irritably. "It's not twelve o'clock yet!"

The woman fumbled at the door handle. "It's his time for sleep, sir—he's night porter, too, from Saturday to Monday. He's my son. We have charge of the building, but there's another man does the day work in the week——"

The clang of the lift descending drowned her weary voice, and seemed to exasperate the two men who were farthest from her.

"Come inside, and shut the door," Mr. Buller broke in abruptly. "We don't want all the world in." He spoke in a tone of authority that brought the caretaker inside as if without volition on her own part, and the door shut behind her with a click.

Then, without a tremble or a rumble to warn them, there came the sound of an immense crash, with lesser crashes following it as if some portions of the solid earth had given way and were falling into Eternity. It was so sudden and so staggering that it galvanised all the five

human beings in Mr. Wiley's room into instinctive movement.

The caretaker did not attempt to re-open the door, though she was nearest to it. She fell against the wall as if the noise had struck her there, crying, "My Gawd!" It was Alfred Welch and Morris the Jew who made a rush for the door, grasping the handle at the same moment, and pulling at it with double strength that did not open it. "It's jammed!" gasped Morris, seizing on the explanation with the quicker intelligence. "Let's put our shoulders to it and bring it down," shouted Welch, unconscious that he had raised his voice. But the Jew, livid with fear, stopped him. "Don't pull it—you may pull the ceiling down. Look at that!"

The ceiling, unusually ornate for an office, was heavily moulded, with a centre ornamentation that had once supported a gasolier. Running across it, from the door inwards, was a great crack that might have been there before or just appeared. Neither man had noticed it when he entered, but its presence was ominous. They stood squabbling and arguing at the door, the Jew's caution frustrating the journalist's frenzied desire to escape.

The girl, Elizabeth Egerton, had made a rush in the opposite direction, for the window. It looked out on that undisturbed vista of other silent windows, packed with bales and boxes, wherein not one thing had moved. The disaster, whatever it was, was not there. But as she tore at the catch to throw up the sash she found that the window as well as the door had jammed; and even if they broke it there was no escape that way, for the wall fell sheer below her to a dizzy depth, and the untenanted buildings round stared at her with blind eyes.

At the moment of the crash Buller had swung from his

position in front of the Constable as if he would flee. But there being no exit he paused as if paralysed. It was he, however, who voiced the danger.

"I believe the front of the building has fallen into the street. It has shifted the whole structure so that the frames of the doors are out of line! The whole may fall upon us before we are rescued. Does anyone know we are here?" He looked round the room with a fierce anger that altered his heavy face to startling expression. No one answered, but the caretaker's voice was heard repeating "My Gawd!" as if she were stupefied. "Does anybody know that we are here?" he said again loudly.

"How can they?" Welch retorted hotly, as if it were an insult. "We all came in on our own—we haven't got a business here. And these offices are supposed to be empty!"

"Could the front of the building fall without the rest of it?" questioned Betty Egerton with more collected thought than anyone had shown yet. "And why should it fall?"

Buller frowned at her as at some teasing child. "There may be a subsidence from the network of underground borings. The City is honeycombed," he said sharply. "Or they may be making structural alterations to the other side of it. That has happened before. It happened last year in Cannon Street. I felt the whole place shaken."

"So did I!" and "So did I!" said the two men at the door.

"Nothing else seems to be happening" said the girl with faint interest in her voice. Of them all, she appeared the least frightened despite her rush to the window. The youth in her made even their precarious position an adventure.

It was true that all sounds had gradually ceased. At

first there had been a faint succession of lesser falls, as if masonry were slipping down and gradually dribbling away. The day had been singularly still and windless, and the quiet in the room appeared all the more incongruous after the meaningless crash. There were no audible cries or rush of traffic or anything to break the silence here at the back of the building, and the horror of the five trapped human beings was intensified by their being unable even to speculate as to what was going on.

Then, without reason, they all began to talk—hardly waiting for the others to hear them—of their own threatened lives and the incredible fact that their personal future was at stake. The rich man raved at fate, which might treat him as if he were as insignificant as a beggar. He looked at his watch, his large hands trembling with a kind of indignation as he drew it out.

"I had an appointment at twelve o'clock to receive my broker's report—it means half a million." He gave a scoffing laugh. "Half a million—and I'm shut up here like a rat in a trap. I may die before I know that the deal is through—d'you hear? I may die, and half a million waiting for me . . ."

"I've a wife and children dependent on *me*!" said the journalist. "What's to become of them if I'm gone?" He choked on the words. "Minnie and the kids! Minnie and the kids! God help us!"

"It seems to me we had better help ourselves," said the girl dryly. "We're more concerned in the matter than God."

"My son's on the lift—'e's gone. I 'eard it go down," said the caretaker in her monotonous voice. "'e lost a foot in the War—'e's lame. But 'e 'ad 'is pension . . . If 'e's gone I'm better gone too. And most women is better out of it, to my mind."

The Jew pointed at the dreary figure, with the fine hand of an artist. "That's your Christian religion!" he said with sudden venom. "That's all a belief in Jesus Christ has done after two thousand years." He sidled nearer to the girl, looking in her face with bright, eager eyes. "You said just now that our lives were more our own than God's. Well, I'm a Jew—I don't think so. But you, who are a *Christian*, have become an unbeliever in your faith already at your age!"

"I never went in for pi'," said the girl with frank apology. "I was taught it as a child, just like everyone else. But it didn't take hold."

"Not even the doctrine of the Nazarene?" sneered Morris. He spoke to her directly now, as if he felt her youth vulnerable to his hatred. "That wonderful gospel which is so garbled that the translators contradict themselves! There's no credible record—it's a myth. Your preacher of love and longsuffering was the brawler who made a row in the Temple! Anyhow, he was a cad!" He had been speaking excitedly, and the last words came like an hysterical outburst, the whole betrayal of his nation in the angry gibe. "Don't you think so? Don't you agree with me?"

"I never thought much about it," said Betty simply. She was busying herself with trying the locked drawers of the roll-topped desk and the files for letters, and her eyes went up and down the walls to the pictures whose value was useless to them now. "If only they had been hung with cord we could have used it," she said. "Those wires are too short—"

Buller watched her movements with the irritation of his endangered wealth. "How would you have used it?" he asked ironically. "Out of the window? You can't open it!"

"We could have smashed the glass. The cord might have lowered one of us to the next floor."

"If this window-frame is jammed the next will be, and the door. You would only dangle over infinity for nothing! It's monstrous," he broke out again, childish in his anger, "that I should be here—that my life should be in danger—I'm too rich a man!"

"I've interests too," sneered Morris, "though you might not think it of one of my race. I could have got more out of life than you, with all your money, because I have finer brains!" Which was very likely true. "If I have got to die there will be bigger qualities wasted than money-making."

"Minnie and the kids!" muttered Alfred Welch. And then, instinctively, "O Christ!"

The girl glanced at the Jew, expecting another outburst, but it was the caretaker who cried out.

"'elp us!—it's coming!"

Without more warning than the first crash the great centre-piece of ornate moulding broke from the ceiling and came down with a deafening thud, throwing up a dust and mass of fragments that blinded and bewildered the occupants of the room for a moment. It had pulled down half the ceiling with it, and two people in the death-trap had shrieked—the caretaker and the Jew. When the dust settled, and they could see each other, four of the five were safe, pressed back against the walls as if clinging to them for safety. Buller had blood running down his face from a wound on his forehead where a lump of plaster had struck him, but he did not know it. He was pointing with a shaking hand to something that lay under the fallen mass.

"Look!" he said.

The girl had been standing in the centre of the room

when the caretaker cried her warning—too late. The ceiling had fallen on her and struck her down, well nigh burying her in debris. The heaviest mass was on her body, and as the three men crept towards her they gazed upwards, awestruck, at the great hole above them and the naked girders of the floor above, like bones showing through torn flesh.

"She's done in!" gasped Welch, trying to push some of the solid mass from the buried body. The horror-struck onlookers could just see the girl's injured head fallen backwards as the weight of the plaster had struck it, knocking her down. The close felt hat had been ripped from her, and her bright short hair was dabbled with blood that oozed from a wound in the scalp. It was as if the heavy weight had smashed her; but she was not dead, for something like a ripple on water passed over her face as they pulled away the easier portions of the ponderous mass under which she was buried. Mr. Buller, hitherto the least executive of the party, became suddenly the authority of their efforts, directing them how to pull away the lesser fragments in order to get at the heart of the heap. It seemed as if half the ceiling were on the floor. Their exertions were hindered by the bits of plaster that still fell suddenly upon their heads, driving them back with a shuddering sense of their own peril. But after some minutes it was evident that they must have further help before the girl could be extricated or her injuries ascertained. They had succeeded in clearing her body down to her waist, but she was buried beneath a weight they could not move without leverage.

"Nothing in this damned place to be of any use!" muttered Buller, looking round the ordinary, official room that seemed so suddenly disordered with its gaping wound in the ceiling and the debris on the floor, with plaster

spluttered over desk and chairs. It was significant that nobody looked at or thought of the pictures, the strange cause that had drawn all these unlikely people together and imperilled their lives. Linnell's cornfield still shone from its corner, the Constable hung in dark radiance on the wall facing Mr. Wiley's office chair; but nobody looked at them or thought of their value if they should be injured. Human lives are so much more to their owners in the real stress of the moment than any artificial value of pigment or canvas.

The caretaker had thrown her working apron up over her face when Elizabeth Egerton was struck down by the falling ceiling and was whimpering to herself like a child who is too cowed to cry outright. She had never moved from her position against the wall near the door, but Buller spoke to her, roughly, as if he would drag her out into the room by the force of his voice.

"Why don't you see if you can do anything for the girl? You're a woman—you ought to know what to do!"

Mrs. Hobbs dropped her apron, showing a white and working face. She wiped her bleared eyes, but did not attempt to move.

"What can I do, sir? I don't know what to do. She's dying—you can't even get her out."

The Jew, Morris, bent down and looked at the girl's face with more intelligence than the others had shown. "She's coming round—" he said in a lower voice. "She was only stunned. She'll be conscious of what's happened to her! —what can we tell her?"

"Pore dear!" moaned the caretaker. "But women is mostly better dead—"

Her pessimism seemed to madden Buller, who seized her by the arm and thrust her towards the figure on the floor.

"Go to her and say something—something—comforting," he said desperately.

"What is there to say, sir? We're all in the same 'ole. She'd be better out of it——"

"Oh damn you!" said the millionaire furiously. "Can't you help her? Morris—speak to her!"

"Are you in pain?" said the Jew gently, leaning down over the helpless crushed body. "Can you hear me?"

The girl opened her dim eyes and looked at him curiously, as if he were already a figure in another world. "Did my mother—come?" she said slowly.

"No, my dear—no. But are you in pain? Can we do anything for you?"

"No—I don't think so," the young voice answered wonderingly. "Only there's something heavy—on my feet——" She looked round the concerned faces, and it was as if she read her doom there. "Is this—death?" she said.

The tears began to run down Morris's face, and he drew back to hide them. He was the most highly strung person in the room, and more finely organised than his patron Buller. For a minute nobody spoke, they all stood staring at the helpless body half buried in the great mass of plaster, unable to do anything or to offer her any hope.

At last—"It's very lonely!" said the weary young voice.

"Oh Gawd!" whimpered the caretaker.

"Yes—God—" said Betty Egerton on her labouring breath. "And Christ—But you said—it was all invented—He didn't really preach?" She looked up at the Jew without reproach but with something wistful in her face; and Isaac Morris turned his own from her. He could not recant.

It was the journalist who fell on his knees beside her,

muttering, "I can't stand this!" and thrust his eager, commonplace face down to her own.

"Look here," he said huskily. "I'll tell you what *I* think. He *did* say it—better than all those Gospel stories that seem to contradict each other—but He was badly reported. Don't you see? There was no one to take it down straight. He said just what you want Him to say—give Him the benefit of the doubt!"

His crude simple reasoning reached the girl as no better words might have done, or else what she had been mechanically taught in her childhood came back to her in spite of all the intervening scepticism of the age she had lived in. She smiled as if comforted, and put her cold hand out feebly to find Alfred Welch's.

Buller had turned aside, like Morris, as if afraid to look. There was a silence that seemed interminable, and then Welch laid the girl's hand down and rose stiffly.

"She's gone——" he began, but the Jew interrupted him with a sudden scream of excitement.

"They're coming—they've found us—we've saved!" he shouted, and began yelling and hammering on the door like a madman.

Sounds of feet and answering voices came from the corridor outside, and confused orders to "Stand back!" and to keep away from the window. The anguished minutes were so full of action and inaction, so full of hope and dread, that nobody afterwards remembered how long it took before the window and door seemed to give way together, and there was a rush of men with ladders and ropes inside and out, salvage men and police and a long fire-escape—the delirious noise and joy of returning life after hours of parley with death. In the hurry of escape they seemed callous of the tragedy that had already happened, and hardly did more than answer

the questions of the rescuers—one woman crushed under the fallen ceiling, and killed; no one else injured——

"Lucky for you," said a constable curtly. "The whole front of the building has fallen. They are shoring it up. This way—not by the door—the window's safer——"

Alfred Welch had been doing something unnoticed by the others while door and window were broken in. He had picked up two splinters of wood from the damaged window-frame and bound them together with a piece of string dropped by chance on Mr. Wiley's table. He paused a moment by the dead girl, and stooping laid his rough cross on her breast, before he also made his rush for safety.

"Let the body alone," said the policeman sharply. "We'll attend to that later. Go on, and do as we tell you——"

The caretaker, helpless with terror, was being lowered to the rescuing party in spite of herself. The men followed, clinging to ropes and rocking ladders as though they were clinging to life. In Mr. Wiley's room quiet once more reigned—a quiet shared by the stiffening body on the floor, and the rich sombre landscape hanging on the wall above her. . . .

VIII

THE SINLESS SUMMER

The Somerset road was like the letter S; on the left of the curve was the high wall of a farm garden, and on the right another high wall of a larger property. Between the two the road turned sharply, with the added curve of a descent to the straighter highway on to Wellborough.

Chester had been riding his new Douglas carefully, for he did not yet know the engine. The motor cycle had been going beautifully, however, and given him no trouble since he left Bristol. In front of him was a two-seater car, a Cowley, he thought, driven by a lady no longer young, with a still older lady beside her. The driver signalled him to pass if he would, but he held back until he should see past the curve of the road.

He heard the second motor cycle coming before she was visible round the corner. There was something wrong with her exhaust, and probably her rider could not hear the Cowley's horn, though the lady sounded it nervously. . . . When the accident happened Chester had almost stopped, but it could not quite save him. The advancing motor cyclist was not on his own side of the road, and was coming along at forty miles an hour to swing round the ascent. He saw the Cowley too late, and could not clear the side of her. It seemed to Chester that the cycle actually mounted the footboard of the car, swerved off, and caught his own front wheel, throwing him heavily into the wall.

He was conscious of a blow on his shoulder and head, and of picking himself up not much hurt. But his front

wheel was twisted so that it would require heavier tools than he had with him to right it. He cursed aloud, and found something trickling into his eye and blinding him. It was blood, but only from a scalp wound. He felt all right. What blasted luck for this to happen the first day of his annual holiday, and on a new machine!

He looked at the two-seater car and saw that the older lady was leaning back, faint, and that the younger could not get past her out of the driver's seat. Chester thought she was hurt, for she held her right arm with her left hand. He was going to help her when he saw the farmer and his wife come running out into the road, the woman going to the ladies in the car, the man making for the cause of the accident—the second motor cyclist.

He lay in the middle of the road, mixed up with the remnants of his machine, a dreadful sight. His coat and half his arm seemed to be torn away, and a pool of blood was already collecting in the road beside him.

Chester went forward to help the farmer, who was trying to move the helpless body out of the way of possible traffic.

"Chawed himself up," he said briefly. "His own fault—poor chap. Driving in the middle of the road like hell. Are the ladies hurt?"

"My wife is seeing to them. You're bleeding yourself!"

"Only a scratch. I could get on again if my machine would go. What are we to do with that?" He looked at the huddled body at their feet.

"Get him to the hospital as quick as we can. Help me put him in the ladies' car. I can drive a Cowley."

"Isn't she damaged, too?"

"Not much," said the farmer, stooping to the injured man. He groaned as they moved him, and sank back in their arms a dead weight. But between them they

lifted him into the car, and the farmer with unexpected skill bound the torn arm to stop the bleeding.

"I'll drive him straight to Weston," he said. "It's the nearest hospital. Go into my house there, and let my wife see to your head. I'll bring a doctor back with me."

"I'm all right," said Chester gruffly. He felt suddenly sick from the sight of the other cyclist. "Sure you can manage?"

But the farmer was already off, driving to the town, and Chester turned mechanically to his own cycle, which was leaning against the wall as if it also felt a little faint. He handled it tenderly, shaking his head over the distorted steering; it was, as he feared, a two-man job if it did not actually entail "going into dock" at a garage. Nevertheless his belief in his own resources belonged to his youth and training, and he was sure that he might manage to cripple on if he could get some tools. He glanced at the gates across the road, which he had hardly noticed as yet, and saw that they opened into a promising drive which evidently led to a larger house than the farm's. At such a place they would surely have a garage, and a mechanic who could help him.

He tied his handkerchief round his head to stop the blood which was still trickling down his face, and thrust his cap into the straps that held his suit-case on the carrier. Then, pushing his disabled machine, he crossed the road and entered the open gateway. But the drive rose rather steeply before him, the house being evidently on a higher level, and the motor cycle was more unwieldy than usual owing to her battered condition. Chester found that he could not make the effort to push her without increasing his own faintness and giddiness, and was forced to lean her up against a great cedar of Lebanon which, with other

evergreens, overshadowed the drive. He went on by himself, wondering if there were some side gate farther down the road by which he might not better have entered, to find his way to the garage or stables.

Then, after a bend in the drive, he emerged suddenly in front of the house. It was a two-storied building, standing over ample ground to give it large rooms and plenty of them, and was evidently an old place of some importance—possibly a manor in Tudor times. To the left were lawns and shrubberies, and to the right the trees increased up a farther slope, forming a screen to what might lie beyond. Chester crossed the drive and walked round the angle of the house on the right, thinking that it might lead him to the back premises; but a minute later he perceived his blunder, for he found himself in what was evidently the real pleasure garden of the property, and more private than the shrubbery would have been.

He stopped short, bewildered, suddenly aware that he was intruding and that he was only the travelling demonstrator of the Vulgate Company's rock-drilling patent. Why his social status should just then have occurred to him he could not tell, save that he seemed to have stepped out of the world he understood—the world of rock-drilling and motor bicycles, and his own native self-assertion—into a fairy tale.

Before him was the gradual slope of a hillside which rose on the south side of the house and which the trees climbed as he had seen from his approach. But the ground near the house had been cleared ages ago to make way for a rose-garden cut in terraces of soft green turf, and in the centre of these terraces were grass steps leading to pergolas not yet in bloom. It was only the bush roses in the lower beds that were out in all the glory of red and pink and

yellow, but they were enough to make the June afternoon odorous. Down the grass steps, treading deliberately and lightly, was coming a lady such as he had never imagined or seen off the stage. She was dressed in rose-coloured silk, the straight bodice coming down to her hips and ending in innumerable frills edged with lace. A frilled fichu of the same glowing colour wrapped her shoulders and was crossed on her breast, leaving her neck visible, and as she wore no hat she carried a small sunshade over her head flounced like her dress. Her stockings were a much paler shade of pink, and her extravagantly heeled shoes were dark red. On either side of her, preening and bowing from step to step, walked two white peacocks, their tails spread like faintly jewelled clouds, and this incredible procession advanced towards Stanley Chester, demonstrator of rock-drills, as if it were an everyday occurrence and not a fancy-dress show.

Had he but known, the dress was no more than the most chic of Parisian afternoon gowns of that year ; but his own friends and acquaintances got their clothes from Bristol or Bath and were very well satisfied with them. They had not the most remote likeness to the lady of the terraces. Chester found himself idiotically repeating " Juno and the Paycocks ! " which he knew was the title of a play. But he had never seen the play, nor was the lady in the least like Juno. She was much more like a picture by Greuze—if he had known any more about Greuze than Heathen Mythology—and her slight figure was the ideal of the Rue de la Paix rather than the Greek sculptors'.

He stood and stared. If he had not been muddled by the motor accident he would probably have bolted round the house again, and stood still to rub his eyes or laugh in the shrubberies. The lady might be a lunatic, or

rehearsing for a cinema ; but she seemed quite unconscious of her own extraordinary appearance, and continued to descend the steps with her peacocks, looking at Chester with as much surprise as he at her. He had forgotten that his own figure was as unforeseen to her as hers to him, and that he was an object of some alarm and terror with his bandaged head and bloodstained face. He saw her pause on the last step and heard her utter a little scream, and with a vague idea of apology he tried to go to meet her, staggered suddenly, and completed the picture by falling actually at her feet in a half-faint.

Before consciousness quite left him he thought he heard her calling someone. It sounded like " Commille Abo ! " —but he did not see Commille (or was it Camille she meant ?) arrive. The fairy story and the prosaic world outside the garden vanished together, and he went down into darkness.

* * * * *

When he came to himself it was evening. Clearly, the real world had not returned, and the fairy story continued ; for he was in bed in an old-fashioned room with lattice-paned windows and great oak beams across the low ceiling. There were glazed chintz curtains to the bed, and beside him in a low chair was sitting an old woman in a frilled white cap and stiff dimity gown. He had never been given to fairy stories, even as a child, but the travesty of modern pantomimes reminded him that the grandmother in Red Riding Hood, or Mother Goose, might have worn such clothes. Only, these characters were generally taken by men with much coarse humour, and the old woman by his bedside had a sweet lined face that had nothing comic about it, and somehow suited her odd cap and gown.

Chester turned his head on the pillows languidly, and

discovered that it ached and that his neck was stiff and bruised. He remembered the motor smash as something long ago, and wondered that the effects should still pain him. The old woman put down some work she was doing, and looked at him with clear blue eyes set in a network of wrinkles.

"You are better," she said in good English but with an unmistakable foreign accent. "Can you raise yourself that I give you what the doctor say you may drink?"

Chester did raise himself on his elbow, wondering if this were the "Camille" that the lady of the peacocks had called?

"I'm afraid I'm a nuisance," he said frankly. "I'm awfully sorry I came into the garden! I was looking for help for my bike." It seemed ridiculous to mention a bike to the old woman in the frilled cap. A carriage made out of a pumpkin and mice to draw it would have been more suitable. But she took it quite calmly.

"Madame was much frightened when you fell down," she said. "But we got you to bed, Mr. Crust and I, and the doctor came. He said you must lie there these three and four days, and you will be well."

"Oh I say!"

Visions of his lost holiday floated before Chester's dazed eyes, and of certain friends of his at Wellborough even now expecting him, and of the Vulgate Company and the business tour he was to make of Somerset after his fortnight's leave was up.

"I must get on to Wellborough to-morrow at least!" he said feebly.

"Is it your friends that will be anxious? Madame was asking. We will send Rennault with a telegram if you wish. But you must lie there and get well."

It seemed there was no help for it, and his damned head

was aching again with every movement he made. He found that it was properly bandaged, and that his bright short hair had been shaved like a convict's at the temples. The Vulgate Company's demonstrator was not a very vain young man considering that he was undeniably handsome, and he only wondered for a minute if he would be much scarred. The next he had asked his nurse for a paper and pencil and with a good deal of pain had written out a wire.

"Sorry delayed by accident to bike. Come on in a day or so. Cheerio. Chester."

"If you'll send that I'll be obliged," he said as he lay down again with relief. "Would you tell me whose house I am in? Who was the lady who—who—was frightened at me?"

"It is my mistress, Madame Biscombe. This house is called High Biscombe. It belongs to someone in the family of Madame, and she is living here for the Summer."

"Oh!—well, I'm very much obliged to her. Is she a French lady?"

"Madame is English!"

Madame had not looked at all English to Chester's astonished eyes, but he was bound to accept her as such. He wondered if there were a *Mr.* Biscombe in the house?—No, Monsieur would account for the French title of Madame. He hoped she would not come to see him. She made him nervous, and unusually self-conscious. Had she been the kind of woman he knew,—that is, his own class,—he would not have cared a cent for his bandaged head, and would have made a joke of his being in bed. But the rose-coloured lady of the peacocks was neither to be joked with nor treated as an ordinary being in an ordinary world. He felt that he ought to apologise for his appearance and for having frightened her, and he

wondered who " Mr. Crust " was and how he and the old nurse-woman got him to bed, and—who the deuce supplied him with pyjamas! For he was wearing pyjamas to his own intense amazement, and they were not his own. They were a deal too short in the leg. He did not even like to ask the old woman these questions; somehow they made him feel shy. Stanley Chester shy! How the girls at Wellborough would giggle if they could know! But it would all make a good joke for them in a day or so,—a regular scream,—with the boot on the other leg. He would describe the lady and her peacocks and her absurd dress with a humour copied from the American revues, and the old woman in her frilled cap and short full skirts—not a bad subject for a bright young man with a reputation for wit.

There came a soft tap at the door.

Chester swallowed something in his throat and gasped, afraid of he knew not what. If he had possessed the least imagination he might have experienced a certain excitement through being in such unusual circumstances; but as he had little or none it merely made him uncomfortable. He liked to classify everything that came along, and feel that he could cope with it, and the present experience could neither be classified nor disposed of with certainty. If it had been a house full of crooks, a mystery that involved detective work, it might have given him a thrill of sensation, since he had seen plenty of such things on the cinemas. But he was not used to fairy stories.

The old woman rose and went to the door at once, opening it for her mistress. She came into the room softly and kindly, and stood near the bed looking at the young man with the bandaged head who gazed at her as stolidly as a child might have done to conceal his alarm at a stranger. She was no longer wearing the rose-coloured silk dress,

but her clothes were no less unexpected and unprecedented to Chester's eyes. Long white draperies with a golden fringe that flashed out of the folds as she turned or moved her arms,—draperies that fell almost to the floor, and yet made him catch his breath with a shocked feeling that they might part almost to the waist with an untoward movement. Little gold shoes with enormous glittering heels, and round her neck a rope of jewel beads that flashed pale fires in the level light. They were opals, as he guessed, wondering that she should wear such unlucky stones, however valuable; but perhaps fairy princesses were above ill-luck?

The lady did not seem more conscious of her bizarre appearance than she had been in the afternoon. She had just changed her dress for dinner as she might have done in Paris or Nice, and she could not conceive the state of mind of her enforced guest. She nodded to him reassuringly, with a certain air that was almost condescension and obviously designed to put him at his ease.

"I am glad to see you better!" she said in a low-pitched voice of which even Chester in his embarrassment felt the charm. "You gave me such a fright when you fell, and the blood on your face and head! You must lie still and then you will soon feel better. Dr. Corney says it is only a flesh wound and you had a wonderful escape. Margot here will nurse you—" She laid her hand affectionately on the old woman's shoulder—"she is the best nurse you could have! She has nursed me many times."

The old woman gave a pleased sound in the roof of her mouth, like a cluck, and looked from Chester to her mistress with a quick glance that was half deprecating, half regretful. Chester instantly took the regret to himself, and wondered if he had appropriated services that belonged of right to the lady.

"You mustn't let me be in the way," he faltered feebly. "Couldn't they take me in at the farm over the road—?"

"But no—we are quite glad to have you!" said the lady a little eagerly. "It is so very quiet here. I know none of my neighbours, and I am not allowed to go out much."

"Madame is herself an invalid!" said Margot stiffly. "It is impossible for her to see company."

"The doctor here—" Madame shrugged her shoulders carelessly—"is in charge of me. I am supposed to rest. It is dull. So you see your adventure was our advantage,—though I wish it had not ended in that bad head!"

Her smile broke suddenly upon him like a flash of sunshine, so that he really blinked as if dazzled. She was an astonishing lady, unlike anyone he had ever encountered. But then, of course, she was a foreigner. In spite of old Margot's assertion that her mistress was English, Chester was quite sure that she was not—at all events not quite. There was another strain in her, French, Russian, Spanish, that diluted the rational red blood of the England that Chester knew. He found himself wondering over Madame long after she had left the room, not with admiration so much as bewilderment. There was something gracious in her manner that was yet a little aloof, as if she stooped to a vassal, and yet she was as ingenuous as a child. The flutter of her swinging draperies with their gilt fringe hiding amongst them still haunted his brain when he closed his eyes. He felt that if she had worn a diadem of stars in her hair it would not have been unsuited to her, absurd though it was for the rest of the world. A lady living in a country house by herself should not have dressed for dinner in such style; but then her clothes seemed to belong to her as part of her unreal personality. By her own showing she had no guests; she dressed up like a stage

heroine, then, for her own pleasure. He heard a silver chime of bells go somewhere in the house, and guessed that this was the dinner gong. Of course Madame could not have an ordinary brazen gong like anybody else! She must be summoned to the table by bells from fairyland. He could not even fancy her eating like people in good health—fruit and wine and wafers were the only things possible. What surprising eyebrows she had! They had as much expression as her eyes, and were drawn as fine as a pencil mark. Her hair in the sunset had been golden auburn, and shone like old copper that has been burnished. She flashed and glittered in his eyes still behind his closed lids. An amazing lady!

He must have fallen asleep again, for it was dark but for a shaded lamp when he was aware of whispers in the room. He opened his eyes cautiously and closed them again, feigning sleep for very shyness. That half-glance had shown him the two figures near the door, the lady in her gleaming silks, the old nurse in her stiff white cotton. The lady said something in a rapid undertone, in French, and approached the bed tiptoe. She stood looking at Chester with an intentness that he felt through his closed lids, and she spoke below her breath, but so clearly that he caught the words. They were the same words that she had said when he fell at her feet in the garden, and he had thought that she was calling somebody in his confused brain. This time he understood them, and the self-conscious blood made him hot all over.

"Comme il est beau!" she said with a sigh.

* * * * *

The doctor came next day. He was of the outside world beyond this enchanted house and garden, and he brought a whiff of the commonplace with him that jarred the harmony of its peace. Chester would have described him

as a good sort of man in his job if he had met with him in more ordinary circumstances—a type of the country practitioner who hunted a bit when he could escape his patients, and covered a large tract of country in his car to prescribe for diphtheria in one village and mumps in the next. He had a joke for everybody, even for Madame, of whom he did not seem so much in awe as he should have been. But she took it with a tolerance that Chester ascribed to her good breeding—she was so great a lady that she could stoop. Even his very commonplace brain and experience had recognised that she belonged to such a different world that the blunders of another could not touch her. They might even amuse her a little. He suspected that she was amused with the doctor when they stood by the bedside together and the man told her to leave the sick nursing to Margot.

"I daresay this young fellow won't thank me, but he's got to be content with the old *bonne*!" he said with a jolly laugh that gave Chester a wild desire to get up and punch his head. He was conscious that he was almost blushing, and the lady laughed a little teasingly.

"I must wait for my share until he is convalescent—yes, doctor?" she said with a glance that she somehow divided between the two men.

"You must wait—until I give you leave, Madame!" said the doctor with an authority that Chester resented as much as his jokes.

"Ah, what a tyrant!" said the lady good-humouredly. But she nodded to Chester as if she promised him something and there were a little confidence between them. He liked that, in spite of the awe of her. He even began to like her condescension. It set her apart, and made it natural to accept her favours. He felt oddly grateful if she handed him one of those cool drinks that Margot was always

mixing, and when he met her gaze it abashed him to remember that she had thought him handsome. He ought not to have overheard that, it was a low-down trick to pretend to be asleep. Only, he was shrewd enough to guess that she had admired him with the frank pleasure she might have given to a child, a dog, a flower—anything that did not matter to her save as an object of beauty.

He stayed in bed for three days by the doctor's orders. He was glad when he was allowed to get up to tea, because he hoped secretly that the cheery, slangy physician would visit him no more. Dr. Corney was out of the picture in that fairy-tale house, even his good-nature dispersed the enchanted atmosphere. The tea was served in the patient's bedroom, and the Vulgate Company's demonstrator had another shock when it was brought in by a dark-skinned manservant in white linen and a crimson cummerbund round his waist. The man's solemn inscrutable face made him like the genii of the tale. He trod softly, as if his feet were bare though he wore felt slippers, and set the tray down before the invalid as he might have served a prince. Such a tea-service Chester had never seen before, for it was old Indian silver such as only Rajahs have now in their palaces, and the cups were like egg-shell, so thin was the painted china. He was almost afraid to eat, in case he should break something or spill the tea on the lace cloth. Fortunately Margot poured it out for him as if he had been a child, and doubled the thin bread and butter on his plate.

"You will like to have some fruit," she said. "*Ah Ciel*, where are the strawberries? Madame commanded strawberries, Mahommed—but it is not possible that Mr. Crust has forgotten them?"

Mahommed gave another of those soulless glances over the tea-table and vanished like a dark dream. Margot, with many exclamations, explained that Madame had

laid particular stress on the strawberries, and that Chester must in no case begin his tea without them. Mr. Crust would without doubt send them up by Mahommed. They were the first gatherings from the beds, which were late this year.

"But in England, everything is later than in France!" she explained gravely.

Mahommed returned with the ripe fruit still in the basket into which they had been picked, and offered no further explanation. It was Chester who humbly suggested that they need not be put on a plate, which the old woman seemed to think a necessary dignity. So he ate them from the basket, and they were delicious, warm with the sun that had shone on the strawberry bed and flavoured as only a strawberry is when really fresh gathered.

"But they are larger and riper in France!" said Margot, who approved, however, of Chester's English appetite. He was young and very healthy, and had still a schoolboy's taste for cakes and cream and jam. He went through the wafers of bread and butter and the fruit, and the little golden cakes, until the plates were all but empty, and his nurse said, "Now no more—or you will be sick again!" and left him with the sheepish feeling that he had disgraced himself. "But you are a big man," she added consolingly, "and you want the keeping up. In a day we will give you good steaks and puddings. Madame will talk to you and I shall have more time in the kitchen."

"Do you do the cooking?" asked Chester aghast. It seemed to him that she had hardly left his bedside.

"I cook all the meals for Madame—I know her taste. The Indians cook for themselves, and for Monsieur Rennault. Mahommed is a chef in his own country. Their food is not so bad." She nodded reassuringly. "But for you I will beat the steak and grill it with the gravy in it as the

English like. And the rice puddings with much milk. That will please you ? "

She looked upon Stanley Chester as a little boy! The demonstrator of rock drills felt his manhood slip from him helplessly, and his boastful self-reliance a drug in the market of fairyland. Yet, somehow, he was not so eager to get away to Wellborough and his own familiar friends as he had been on the day of his accident. Perhaps he had been more "knocked out" than he would have confessed, and was glad of the rest, though the precious days of his annual holiday were being lost one by one. When he was allowed to go downstairs he admitted to himself that he was a bit shaky, with a haste that excused him from making definite arrangements to leave the strange house where he had so oddly become a guest, though he stammered a shy expression of gratitude to Madame with less self-possession than the average schoolboy.

She listened to him with smiling eyes, and inclined her head in acknowledgment, but she put his thanks aside with a largeness of courtesy that disposed of them at once.

"It was a pleasure, Mr. Chester. Dr. Corney says you have made a wonderful recovery, and my poor old Margot is full of pride in her nursing. Is she not quaint! A treasure, I assure you. A Breton by birth, but unlike most of her kind she has travelled a great deal. You know the Bretons are mostly so homesick that you have to send them back to Brittany, to their own villages even, but Margot has been with me for years. She is alternately my cook, and my maid, and my nurse."

"I'm afraid I've taken her away from you since I've been here," Chester heard himself saying diffidently. It was his own voice, because it sounded so commonplace after Madame's, but he had to trust the words to come of themselves she bewildered him so. He could hardly

refrain from staring at her with his mouth open, he did not know whether to stand up or sit down in her presence, and his hands had grown coarse and were in his way. He had always been rather proud of his hands, they looked and were so capable, and it had not worried him that they were blunt-fingered and not particularly well kept. His standards were altering with his environment. Even the house had its influence upon him. He had seen many "show places" grander than High Biscombe, but it was only certain rooms when the family were away and they were thrown open to the public. He had never been so intimately in a house of the kind before, and it was a revelation. The room, for instance, in which he had found Madame on his release from his bedroom was one of a pair of drawing-rooms opening out of each other, and panelled in faded brocade. The furniture would have seemed shabby to his taste if his business sense had not told him its value. The wide open windows let in the summer world outside, and the china bowls in which the roses burned with colour were themselves fit for the cabinets full of china no more valuable. The room seemed somehow to have grown out of generations of good taste and leisure and the money to spend on it, and it made a fitting background for Madame Biscombe sitting in a chair with great claw feet and a rounded back that held her as if in an embrace. She was wearing another wonderful gown of flowered muslin with loose sleeves like a bishop's tied at the wrist with ribbons. Her bright auburn hair, he noticed, was not cut, but was exquisitely waved and folded so closely to her head that it might have been shingled, and her face in the morning light was absolutely unlined and as soft as a baby's. She looked like a girl, but he knew from her eyes that she was older than himself and a woman.

"If you feel well enough to walk I will show you the

gardens," she said, and on Chester asserting that he was quite O.K. and nearly fit again, she led the way out of the house and into the rose-garden where he had first seen her.

"I was so surprised to see anyone in this quiet place!" she said with a laughing reference to it. "No one ever comes here—certainly one does not expect a young man with a bandaged head and the blood running down his face!"

"I'm afraid I was a pretty sickening sight. I know the other cyclist—chap who ran into us all—made me feel bad. That man over the way—the farmer, I suppose—took him to the hospital at Weston."

"Mr. Wildridge," she corrected him. "Yes, he is the tenant of the Manor Farm. I sent the chauffeur with a note to inquire for the other people who were hurt, and the two ladies were able to go home after a time, but the cyclist is very, very ill!"

"Poor chap! Do they think he'll peg out? He did come it, you know!"

"It must have been dreadful to see it!"

"There wasn't much time to see it," said Chester simply. "There never is, in a smash. He was on to the Cowley, and off it on to me, before you could pull off a scream. I'm glad the ladies were not hurt. It wasn't their fault at all."

"It wasn't yours, Mr. Chester—but you were hurt all the same," said Madame quickly. "Am I right in calling you Mr. Chester? You signed the wire to your friends with that name."

"Yes, that's right. Stanley Chester."

Madame looked up at him with amused eyes as they mounted the grass steps of the terrace side by side. He was so very gauche in manner that she knew he was simply nervous—probably very shy—and at the same time superbly handsome!

"But that is very droll!" she said in reference to his name. "Did your mother choose the Christian name on purpose? It should have been Chester Stanley to complete the quotation."

"Chester is my surname," he stammered, wondering what she was driving at.

> "'Charge, Chester, charge! On, Stanley, on!'
> Were the last words of Marmion."

But you do not know the last words of Marmion? I will read it to you some day."

"I'm afraid I don't know much about poetry,"—he pronounced it "poitry," but she did not wince—"Limericks are the only things I remember." He stopped abruptly, and turned rather red.

"Yes, they are amusing—but generally rather naughty," said Madame mischievously. "This is the tennis court, Mr. Chester. You play?"

"Yes, I play a bit, when I can get the time."

"So do I—but I am not allowed to now." She sighed, and touched her heart with a most un-English gesture.

They had reached the top of the steps and he found that the terraces ended in a plateau which had been levelled to beautiful grass courts. Behind this the hill swelled again into woodland. The peacocks were walking about the tennis courts, spreading their wonderful tails like white brocade upon the grass.

"They are named Adonis and Apollo," said Madame. "Are they not beautiful? The hen birds are very dowdy in comparison. Old Crust says that the birds spoil the garden, but I like to see them. And Sir Hugh would not have them sent away for the world!"

"Is he the owner?"

"Yes—Sir Hugh Biscombe, my cousin. I must show

you the lily pond and the cave. They are the curiosities of High Biscombe. Ah, there is old Crust ! "

All that could be seen of the gardener was a humped and shabby back as he crouched beneath a flowering shrub to which he was paying medical attention. When Madame paused beside him and spoke to him he turned, without rising, a wrinkled old face over his shoulder, which to Chester's vague surprise was unmistakably English. He was the first servant at High Biscombe who had not been a foreigner, and the young man guessed at once that he was not one of Madame's own staff but belonged to the place. His manner was grudgingly respectful but surly, and he alone of all in her neighbourhood did not seem to be under her spell.

" I wish we could have some more strawberries, Crust ! " she said as she lingered beside him.

" You can't have what there ain't, mom ! " he retorted somewhat dryly. " I've sent in strawberries for the last few days, and the first gathering's over."

" They don't seem to do very well here. We get such a quantity abroad ! "

" Ah ! They do many things abroad as we don't in England," said the old man oracularly, and thrust his grey head into the bushes again.

Madame laughed, a little mocking peal that yet had a sharper edge to it. Perhaps, like all people who are royally spoilt, she resented even the antagonism of her cousin's gardener. She left him the last word, and led the way past the tennis courts into a winding part of the garden with herbaceous borders and delicate shrubs in bloom. The place was well kept, and Madame generously admitted to her guest that it was all the work of old Crust, who had no assistant but a boy from the next village.

" He is well named, as you heard just now—I call him old

Crusty ! " she laughed. " But he is an excellent gardener. You are tired, Mr. Chester—let us sit down in the cave."

The young man followed obediently and sat down as she told him, though he had meant to say that he was not at all tired and to suggest that he would soon be able to leave High Biscombe and make his way to Wellborough as he had originally intended. But Madame had a way of speaking that admitted of no argument. She had not asked him if he were tired, she had told him that he was so, and he found it impossible to contradict her. As long as she chose to keep him with her he felt that he was going to remain, and until she dismissed him he was as much at her service as any of her staff.

The cave was cool and comfortable in the heat of the June day, and a natural grotto. For a spring rose at the back of it and ran into a channel of rock to feed the lily pond below, and round its source grew maidenhair ferns, no doubt naturalised by man but none the less beautiful in effect. The seats where the two odd companions sat were made of rustic woodwork and half shrouded in harts-tongue and polypody that flourished in the coolness of the cavern ; and on a rocky ledge beside them someone had placed a basket of ripe strawberries ! Madame uttered a little cry of delight curiously blended with triumph.

" Aha, the old rascal ! he had some up the sleeve after all. He is not so bad to me, is he, for all his rough tongue !"

Her bright eyes flashed an appeal at Chester to witness that even old Crust had a soft spot in his heart for her, and she held out a ripe strawberry to him in her fingers, of which the tips were as pink-tinted as the fruit. " Eat ! " she said imperiously. He made an awkward movement of his head, thinking for the moment that she meant him to take it actually from her hand as her dog might, and then coloured hotly, ashamed of the impulse. But she was too

tactful to see, and placed the dish between them so that they might share it.

Through the opening of the cave by which they had entered, they could see the pond below, where red and white lilies were already in bloom, the sunny gardens on the slope, and beyond them the mossy tiles of the old house with its air of strange peace and well-being.

"It seems as if we were out of the world up here!" said Chester at last, with an unusual effort of expression. But Madame sighed.

"Yes, it is very quieting," she admitted. "One feels always falling asleep! But I have been used to so much life—life all round me—people, cities, events—that the contrast is too sudden. I have told Dr. Corney that I suffer so much from *ennui* that it is undoing half the cure."

"I suppose you've travelled a lot?" said Chester vaguely. He had the itch to travel himself, born of his youth and its restlessness. It was the only suggestion of romance that troubled his prosaic mind, the only lure of adventure that he knew. "Have you ever taken one of those trips round the world?" he hazarded. "They take six months, and you get in a lot of places. If I ever make money I think I'd like to go."

"I have been round the world twice, but that is not travelling. You would see nothing on those trips but what the ordinary tourist sees. It is better to go to one country, if it is only in Europe, and get off the beaten track. But for that, one wants interest and introductions. Even if you went to Paris you would only see what Messrs. Cook's or other travel agents could show you. One must live there to know Paris. And it is the people through whom one sees the country. I have known every person worth knowing in France—I have met statesmen, soldiers, the old Noblesse, the new Bourgeoisie, poets, painters, artists

of all kinds, and, not the least, the French peasant. I have stayed amongst the peasants, and can speak their *patois*. Give me a known name in France, and I will tell you of him intimately."

He mentioned a Minister, so well known that even the middle-class Englishman could not fail to have heard of him in international politics, and she at once began a little character sketch that was obviously and wittily true. She told him incidents about the great man, and references—"He said to me once, that when he was in power"—that made even Stanley Chester open his eyes; and then she went on to other countries and told tales of Courts and Parliaments and Secret Services that carried conviction to his ears and made his awe of her mingle largely with respect. That she was a great lady he had vaguely recognised, but she must be a personage herself to have mingled so freely with the great ones of earth. He was so intrigued that he forgot the time and the place until they heard a bell's solemn tolling from the house far below.

"That is the curfew!" exclaimed Madame, rising from her seat. "It is to warn us that lunch is ready, and that we have not heard the chiming gong. They always ring the curfew when I am out in the grounds. Come, Mr. Chester, I have talked enough for twenty and you must be both tired and hungry."

Chester was again aware of a discomfortable sense of inferiority that had been charmed away by her perfectly natural manner and her stories in the cave. He wondered if he looked fit to lunch with her, for he had no clothes with him except those he had brought for cycling. His suit-case that had been strapped on the carrier had been miraculously restored to him, so that he was safe as far as clean linen was concerned; but he thought regretfully of a certain suit, made for him by a small tailor in Bristol,

which he felt was fit for anything from a wedding to taking the girls round town. He did not know that he looked far more like a golfing man in the knickerbockers and short jacket he had worn under his overalls, and in consequence more of a type that came remotely into Madame's sphere; nor did she know that she had been spared the shock of Mr. Chester in his best clothes, instantly converted into the equal of her chauffeur in mufti. It was some consolation to Chester that they were waited on at lunch by the Indian servants—two of them, in the same uniform that had startled him with his first tea-tray—for he thought that they were less likely to criticise his appearance than an English butler would have been. The lunch was what he would have called a "spread" in his own language, and extravagant for two solitary people like himself and Madame, who were both invalids. But he was healthy and hungry and Madame's presence was becoming more familiar and did not take away his appetite. He found the cold soup and salmon mayonnaise different from anything he had ever eaten under those names; and Margot had fulfilled her promise and sent him such a steak as might come from a City restaurant famous for such things, and a rice pudding that was made with cream rather than milk. He filled his honest young mouth with these dainties, and ate with an appetite that made Madame laugh, whereat he coloured all through his clear skin.

"I know I wolf my food, but it's so good!" he said more boyishly than he had ever spoken to a woman except his mother.

"I wish I could do so also! I love to see you," she replied gracefully. "It will do you good and you must sleep this afternoon. I am ordered to rest until tea-time. I will put the hammock tent at your disposal, if you like to be out of doors? For me, I prefer my room. The house is cooler."

"I'm not accustomed to sleeping in the afternoon. I think I'd better have a look at my bike, if you don't mind——"

"You can do that after tea. It is in Rennault's charge, but I am afraid you will have to send it to a garage to be repaired. Rennault has tried, but cannot make it safe for you to ride. Can you speak French?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't."

"You were not in the War? Most men learned in a fashion, if they went to France."

"I was only eighteen when it ended, or I should have tried for the Flying Corps."

"It is a pity about the French, for Rennault speaks very little English. But you will understand each other over the bicycle, I feel sure. When two men get together over a piece of machinery the sign language answers all purposes, though one may be an Eskimo and the other from the Antipodes! *Au revoir*, Mr. Chester—I will lay a bet that you will be asleep before me. Othman will show you the hammock." She called the second of the two servants, and said something to him in his own language. The man saluted, and signed to Chester to follow him out of the house. The hammock-tent was one of those comfortable erections open on one side to the air and with a kind of sofa-bed swinging from it. Chester had never tried lying in such a thing on a June afternoon after a good lunch, because his work allowed him no such leisure or luxuries. He was convinced that he should not sleep, but as Madame had told him to do so he meekly lay down on the cushions while Othman held the hammock steady. It was his first day out of doors after his accident, and he had suffered more from the shock than he knew. The instant that his eyes closed it seemed to him that he was asleep, and so deeply that he did not rouse until the same solemn

tolling bell that had summoned them to lunch rang over the garden to call him in to tea.

He sat up wondering where on earth he was, and saw the gnarled trunks of old apple-trees all round him, and a hedge of sweetbriar beyond, for the tent was set up in an old orchard belonging to the property. Chester tumbled out of his pillows with an instinct that told him he must not keep his hostess waiting, and made a hurried run for the house; but before he joined Madame he paid her what was perhaps the best compliment he was able, for he went and washed his hands again though they appeared to him quite clean. He had never taken such unnecessary trouble for a lady before.

* * * * *

Rennault proved to be a good little fellow, and a fine mechanic, though he could not speak much English. It was from him (as Chester had learned through Margot) that the frightened women had borrowed the pyjamas in which to put the injured man to bed, and when Chester saw the real owner he understood the shortness of the trousers. He was himself at least a foot higher than the Frenchman.

The two men put their heads together over the motor cycle, and understood each other perfectly as Madame had foretold, though it had to be done by touch and gesture. The Douglas was not workable, though her engine had had a marvellous escape. Her steering was hopelessly out of gear, and she wanted straightening out before it was safe to mount her. Chester hoped the other fellow who had caused the accident was insured, and that the Insurance Company would not question the delay caused by his own broken head. Peter Wildridge and his wife were good witnesses any way, and the ladies in the Cowley. He wrote to his own insurance agents, and laid the matter before Madame Biscombe since he could not make arrange-

ments with Rennault. Would she be so kind as to let him telephone the nearest garage to send for his machine, or perhaps the farmer, Mr. Wildridge, would send it in a milk lorry. Madame took the matter lightly.

"Of course we will send your poor cycle to the garage, and in the meantime you will stay here with us until you are quite well and fit to ride. Rennault thinks it may take some days to repair your steering gear. It will amuse me to take you for some drives and show you the country."

He noticed that the phrase "It will amuse me" was often on her lips, and that everybody took it for granted that the reason was sufficient for anything she wished to do. He heard her say to Dr. Corney, "It will amuse me to see those charts of yours of my heart or blood pressure or whatever it is. Bring them with you when you next come," and though the doctor had protested that physicians never let their patients into secrets, he brought them all the same. It would amuse her to take him, Stanley Chester, traveller for the Vulgate Company, for drives in her car, and he found that he also bowed to her regal will and said no more about going on to Wellborough or his own plans for his holiday. It was only while his bike was being repaired, anyhow. He said this to himself as hastily as he had said that he was only staying until he was quite fit, when he first came downstairs. He wished he had a dress-suit to dine in,—that was his real worry. He could bear to lunch with Madame in cycling dress, as she seemed not to mind it, but he could not bear to sit down with her in her wonderful clothes at dinner, though she had the tact to make an apology in her turn, "You must excuse my appearing in *néglig*é, you see I am an invalid!" and to wear soft things that looked as if swansdown and chiffon-velvet had blown together and she had just slipped her arms into them. She never seemed to wear the same

clothes twice, and in each new gown she was more wonderful. But when she found that he was really fretting over the dress-suit she came to the rescue with a promptness of resource that seemed a miracle.

"You are not to say a word. I know where one can be got to fit you, and as good as new. All I ask is that you wear it to please me." She sent a telegram to London, and the next day Rennault went to the nearest station and brought back a box containing the correct dinner suit, dress shirts and ties and all.

"They are wonders, these people," said Madame with charming confidence. "They will supply fancy dress, or clothes for a wedding to people not too well off who do not want to buy outright. You may be sure they are not the ordinary second-hand things. Try them on!"

They fitted to a miracle, and were of a far better quality than he would himself have bought. "What beats me is how you knew my size!" he said blankly, and Madame laughed with mischief.

"Margot measured your clothes while you were out of the way, and you yourself told me your height—six feet one! They suit you very well. Now I hope you will be more comfortable to dine with me!"

Shyness is never so cruel as at meals, and his had been so patent that she could not help seeing what she so courteously ignored. But the dress clothes put him even more at his ease than her manner. He no longer wondered if he ought to pass the salt or wait for Othman to bring it to her, and his hands were too busy with his knife and fork to get in his way. He was observant if not imaginative, and he had stealthily watched Madame eating her courses so that he should make no blunder with the asparagus or the cheese. After a few days he could trust himself to do the right thing by habit without having to think about it,

and was able to give his full attention to the delight of her voice and her careless, easy conversation. She could hold him absorbed for any number of hours that she chose to spend with him without his being able to say why stories of people and places he had never seen should be of so much interest to him. He did not know that he was listening to one of the best *raconteuses* in Europe, and that her capricious will to keep him amused and satisfied was rarely so exerted.

He had been nearly a week at High Biscombe before a solution occurred to him of the riddle of her personality. Sometimes he had thought she must have been an actress to account for her versatility, then that she was the clever wife of some man high in office like those she talked of, which might account for her practised charm. But neither could quite account for the intangible atmosphere of power about her until it dawned upon him that "Madame Biscombe" might be only an incognito for a very much higher title. Was she some scion of royalty practically in hiding on account of her health, and had he really stumbled on a princess, though mortal rather than fairy? The possibility gave a sudden excitement to his observance of her, and explained many things that had puzzled him. Dr. Corney's half-laughing deference to her lightest wish, which he had resented as being a thinly veiled mockery, might be the good fellow's way of disguising his knowledge of her rank and treating her like a spoilt child. The Indian servants' servility seemed to betray her also. And there was in her own manner a certain freedom from restraint, almost a familiarity, that might spring from a sense of her own unassailable position. A lesser woman must have guarded her dignity more. But even to himself—the Vulgate Company's demonstrator and a traveller of samples—she was the gay good comrade, as if she knew that it was impossible for him to misunderstand her.

He did not misunderstand. Gradually—very gradually—he had raised her to a pedestal where royalty should be, and never for one instant regarded her as on the same plane as himself, however she might honour him with her intimate companionship. He hardly thought of her as made of the same clay as himself or his own friends and acquaintance. Yet he did not suppose that she was a near relative of the Reigning House, or that her real name was as familiar as a household word to English-speaking people. She was probably more remotely connected, one of the "minor royalties" whom the public almost forgot unless they were opening bazaars or laying foundation stones. But she was none the less royal. Her breeding, her habits, the unconscious state she kept, and above all her intimate knowledge of great people all over the world, went to prove it. How could she have known princes and statesmen and diplomats, if she were not of equal rank?

But the discovery awakened a new diffidence in him as regarded his own position. She had accepted him on his face value as a young man accidentally injured at her gates, and in the kindness of her heart she had given him hospitality and nursing. No doubt it had "amused her" to have his company in her guarded, solitary state, and people in her position could afford to amuse themselves even with those of a lower rank. But he felt that he ought to explain to her just what he was—a person belonging to the lower middle class, not quite a working-man because he had had a better technical education, but much nearer to her chauffeur than even to a professional man like Dr. Corney. It was embarrassing to have to explain to her that she was associating with an inferior, if she had not realised it to its full extent; but the shrewd common sense of his class told him that it was so. When her whim for keeping him was over, he would no doubt pass out of her

life and she would forget all about him. None the less he had an objection, that he could not himself explain, to sailing under false colours. In the end he blurted out something about his work, and the district he was touring when his holiday should be over, with the determination to force it upon her notice that she was entertaining a traveller in a certain class of trade.

She met him with the same charming tact that she had shown all along, not at all disturbed by his revelation, and instantly interested in his work. Did he only have the one fortnight's holiday in the year? How disastrous that he should have had the accident at the very beginning! And those rock drills—how interesting! He must needs explain the process to her. She showed an intelligence in grasping the technicalities of Air Compressor Plants, "changing steels," and drilling bits, that he had found in no other woman, and he was beguiled into a description of competitions with other drilling patents, and the excitement of high-speed demonstrations. "You're up against it when the strata vary," he said in confidence. "You may find a band of clay and sandstone or flint in the midst of the limestone. Then you change the steel for an augur, if you know your job. When the material is what we call consistent I've drilled up to forty-eight in one hour, including changing steels. It does make you sweat!" he added ingenuously. "But you won the tests!" she said triumphantly, her eyes sparkling, as if his competence were something that belonged to her also. He felt the thrill of achievement again from her enthusiasm. In return she told him of quarries abroad which she had seen, and the way of working them for marble. Far from betraying that she saw a social mistake in encouraging him, she only extended her hospitality to him in the future.

"When you are obliged to go back to your work it will not be very far, since all these quarries you visit are in one county. On a motor cycle the distance is nothing. You can come back to see us on Sundays, or when you have time off, and let us assure ourselves that you are feeling no ill effects from your fall. You will come, will you not?"

He stammered that he should like to come, but did not want to intrude. He was under an obligation, already.

"Nonsense!" she laughed. "It is you who are putting us under an obligation. Margot would be really fretting if her patient went away and never came back to show her that he had not relapsed. And for me——"

She paused with more expression than if she had finished the sentence. In the eyes she turned on him there was something that was almost like affection for a child, and at the same time remorse or regret. He did not answer, because there was a contraction in his throat that choked him. He was so excited that he could not speak, and his strong hands were shaky, as they had been just after his accident.

He was not in the least in love with her, as he understood that indescribable emotion, but he was learning the meaning of worship. She was a woman who must always have been worshipped. He did not know her age, or even guess it, but he knew that she must be older than he. Sometimes, if she had had a bad night, her face would be wan and lines would start out in her smooth skin that had not been there in strong daylight; but he attributed that to her state of health, which evidently gave the household some anxiety. On one of these occasions old Margot had confided in him with tears in her bright blue eyes:

"Madame should be more careful—she frightens me.

Oh, she has been very, very ill this winter, and it is necessary that she should take care. I love her like my own child! . . . her life is precious—to many." The tears caught in the furrows of her face and hung there, pendulous.

Chester broke into impetuous speech. "I'd do anything for her!——"

"I know—I know. You are a kind and straightforward young man! Madame knows that. We would all do our possible to make her well—even those dark-skinned Indians, they love her!"

What filled him with shame was to remember that he had meant to make a joke of these people, to exaggerate and mimic them for the benefit of his vulgar-minded friends—himself the most vulgar-minded amongst them. He grew hot to think of it. He had meant to repay their kindness by laughing at them! He felt himself the lowest kind of cad. But he felt also that it would be impossible for him ever to laugh now, however incredible the adventure might seem when he looked back to it. High Biscombe had got him, body and soul, like the enchanted castle into which the poor miller's son wanders and where he forgets all his past life.

* * * * *

It was in July when his holiday ended, and he set out once more on the fateful road that had tripped him into a fairy tale. The Douglas, showing no signs of her disaster, stood in working order, spick and span, his suit-case strapped to the carrier, ready for him to mount. He was taking nothing with him that he had not brought, but the magical dress-suit was to remain at High Biscombe for him to wear when he had a chance to run over. He had bought it from the agents who had sent it down on hire, and it had cost as much as a new one, to him, but he did not grudge the money. He would have paid for it in

instalments if it had been more than he could at once afford, in order to keep it. It was sentiment, and he knew it, and perhaps Madame knew it also as she gave him her hand in farewell, coming out into the drive to see him mount.

"We have kept your clothes as a hostage!" she said. "You cannot fail now to come back. I shall not say good-bye, Mr. Chester—it is only *au revoir*, *auf Wiedersehen*—some pretty foreign phrase that means that you are returning!"

The sputter of his machine starting drowned his reply, and he was glad because it made it safe to say what he did not want her to hear. It was necessary to him for a moment to speak out of an overcharged heart, but he spoke to the great cedar in the drive and to the July sunshine and the whole summer world, and not to human ears.

To himself he said, "I'm a blasted fool. I could have gone down on my knees . . ."

He did not even remember that had he been leaving his own friends he would certainly have said "Goodbye-ee" and "Cheerio!" and not have troubled to raise his cap. All that seemed such a long time ago.

He knew the road to Wellborough because Madame had driven him that way on one of those excursions since his convalescence. It had seemed odd to sit beside her in the luxurious French car with a chauffeur to drive them, and he had felt a little as if he ought to be in Rennault's place. But she had been so gay, laughing at the village girls in cheap silk stockings drawing water from the village pump, and teasing him about his cropped hair, which was hardly hidden by his cap (thank Heaven it was beginning to grow again!) that he could not help enjoying it also. "She's just like a kid out of school!" he said to himself, and then blushed for the audacity of the thought.

There was no doubt that she loved movement, the simplest outing, anything to break the monotony of her present enforced quietude. At one spot in the road he remembered that she had stopped the car to get out and pick honeysuckle and wild roses, at another that she shrieked with fear because they nearly ran over a dog. How angry she had been with Rennault, who took it philosophically as an old experience! Chester remembered every detail of the way connected with Madame Biscombe; but he never once thought of the friends to whom he was originally going, until he was actually in the quarters he had taken in the town, and then his reversion to them was reluctant.

"I can't get out there to-day—I must see the boss at the quarry," he excused himself, and forgot that he had looked forward to seeing these people as one of the pleasures of his holiday. They did not live in the town, but had a small new house on the outskirts, and he was to have had a room near by and gone in and out to meals with them and taken the girls out on the pillion of his cycle. They were jolly girls, with plenty of pep, and to one of them at least he had paid some attention in the past. But it had become so much the past to him that for the moment he could not get in touch with it again, and he wanted time, a few hours at least, to get his old life and associations into focus. When the miller's son comes back from the enchanted castle to his own home he must find the same queer difficulty in adjusting his perspective; but in the fairy tale it does not matter because he always arrives with a coach and four or a sack of gold and everybody mistakes him for a prince. Chester had only his motor cycle and looked no different from the young man who had set out from Bristol a fortnight since, self-assured, bursting with the capacity to enjoy himself in the same groove in which he lived, and full of anticipation of noisy entertain-

ment from a world he knew. The difference was in himself.

It was subtly apparent to his friends, but they felt it rather than knew it definitely. One of them at least—the girl to whom he should have been paying particular attention—voiced it when she said that Stanley was no use this summer, he was a dud. Her elder sister, already married, took up the cudgels for their guest.

"Don't be so stupid, May—the poor chap's just had a spill and concussion. How can you expect him to get round as he used to do? He looks sometimes as if he'd like to go to bed rather than take you out on the bike. I'm sure his head isn't right yet."

"No, it isn't," snapped May. "It's swelled. He's been staying with highbrows or toffs or that sort, and we're not really good enough for him! He doesn't want to take us about at all, or to see anything of us. *That's* what's the matter with Stan Chester!"

"Well, I'm sure! He told us himself the lady was French and an invalid. It was her old servant nursed him. And he's got his work to see to, he can't be always running around after us. If you make yourself ratty unless your boy's always on the lead, you'll never marry. It puts men off nowadays if a girl can't be sensible."

Mrs. Smith spoke from the superior ground of accomplished matrimony; but May was keener-eyed because her feeling was involved. She knew that Stanley Chester was lukewarm about her where before he had been hot, and she looked for the rival who had taken her place. It was not only his accident or his work, she was sure of that, though she said no more to her sister for lack of sympathy. When it came to the week-ends he was obviously reluctant to spend his leisure time with them, and excused himself on pretexts which she saw through instantly.

"You could come out on Sunday, even if you do meet the quarry people privately on Saturday afternoon!" she said.

"I'm afraid I'm fixed up," said Chester awkwardly. He was not fluent at subterfuge, his best method being to say No outright when it did not suit him to do a thing. May's thwarted angry eyes could not move him a whit from his determination, but they gave him an embarrassed moment.

"I'm going back to see those people who were so good to me at Biscombe," he blurted out. "They expect it, and it's only what's right."

"Oh, please yourself!" said the girl sarcastically. "I don't think you'd go if you didn't want, though," she added shrewdly. "You like new friends better than old!"

"Don't be silly," said the young man impatiently. "I've told you that this lady and her old servant were real good to me. I'd be ashamed not to go and see them as they are kind enough to ask me. I've been here three evenings this week, and not back to Biscombe at all. What more do you want?"

"Nothing, thank you! You can go to your French people as much as you jolly well please. What's this Madame Biscombe like?"

A vision of Madame in her strange radiant gowns floated up before Chester's mental vision. He could not tell what she was like so that May should understand him, though he knew every line of her face. If he said "She has hair that shines like pale copper, and eyes that are violet and grey by turns, and small features, and fine red lips that either are very sad or very merry," it was but a catalogue of bodily beauty without the soul. He could not say that she was the most beautiful woman he ever saw—he thought that was someone like Dolores Costello or Betty Balfour—

all he knew was that she was the strangest. It ended by a shrug of his shoulders and a short laugh from May, and both of them angry with the other. But Chester was free to go to Biscombe as he had meant to all along. It was characteristic of him that though he might have a bad quarter of an hour over it, and be irritated also, he never faltered in his purpose in order to avoid the disagreeables.

After that first skirmish he went out to Biscombe every week without saying anything more about it to May Ponting, or Mr. and Mrs. Smith, or May's own people, all of whom he had known more or less well. "It's no use asking Stan Chester—he'll say he's engaged!" said May when they planned anything for the summer weather, and even Belle Smith began to think that there was some attraction at Biscombe, though she did not attribute it to the invalid French lady. She thought that there was some girl staying there, or in the village, and that May had been badly let down. It was partly her own fault for her bad management, thought the elder sister with the superiority of ignorance. May could not leave the young feller alone, she was always nagging at him. It was plain he wanted to be quiet and wasn't like himself yet. A man with a broken head couldn't always be chaffing and playing the goat! She wondered if Chester had really involved himself with the hypothetical girl at Biscombe, and got her into trouble—for marriage had coarsened her mind instead of making it cleaner. In that case he might be forced to marry her if her people were smart enough about it, for she thought Stan an honest young chap and if he had been too successful with somebody it was only a young man's folly. It was a pity if it were only the housemaid at the big house where he had been ill, for he might have looked a little higher—her sister May, in fact. But it was the most likely solution Mrs. Smith could think of to

account for Chester's regular visits to the scene of his accident.

That any ugly reason for his going back to fairyland could have entered his friends' minds did not occur to Chester, for all his practical common sense. He had an aversion to speaking of Madame Biscombe, partly because he felt that no one in his present circle could have understood his feeling about her, or—if they did—they would think him romantic and sentimental. Perhaps he was both, but his devotion to Madame was what a good Catholic might give to the image of his Saint, what a knight of old might have felt for his Queen. He would have been afraid to make love to her even if he had been a gentleman. The association with her kept him straighter, even in his pleasures, than he had been for many years, and his relations with her were so innocent that they would have seemed to May Ponting very tame.

Chester went back to his strange friends all through August and into September, whenever he could get the time and the opportunity. He left Wellborough when his work in that vicinity was over, and toured other districts, but he always managed to get to Biscombe either on Saturday or Sunday, though it involved rising with the sun and riding till past midnight to get back. On one Sunday in September he woke to a hopelessly wet morning and rode in pouring rain, arriving very wet and flushed in time for tea, and horribly conscious that Madame could not have expected him in such weather. But she met him with cries of delight like a child's.

"We had given you up, Margot and I! It was too wet. But, my poor friend, you are soaked through! Margot must dry your clothes or you will catch a chill. Mar-got!"

She ran out of the drawing-room calling the old woman in

a high sweet voice that did not jar for all its raised tone, and Margot came running also and raised her hands in amazement to see the visitor, half welcoming and half scolding.

"It is too bad a weather for you to have come—it is madness. You must be wet to the skin. Madame will be so glad to have you, for she is *ennuiyée* to tears—is it not, Madame? And the doctor has not been for three days. But you, Mr. Chester, you are so welcome—will you wear the dress-clothes while I dry your own?"

"Oh, I say—I can't wear evening dress to tea!" The young man flushed through his fair skin, rosy already with the ride in the rain, and looked at Madame with laughing blue eyes. "I shall have to go to bed again if Margot wants to dry my things. But it won't hurt me a bit to let them dry on me."

Margot raised her hands in horror. "What is he to do? It is madness to sit in the wet clothes!"

"I know! I know!"—Madame's small fair face suddenly lit up with excitement. "The key of the old bed-chamber, Margot, quick! We will get out some of the clothes and dress up in them. You know—" she turned to Chester in rapid explanation—"my cousin told me to look anywhere, everywhere, in this house and take anything that pleased me. It is full of treasures, shut away for generations. I peeped into a powder closet once and saw an old brocade that is priceless. But it is so dull rummaging alone. We will open the closets and cupboards and find something you can wear, and I also. It will amuse me to see you as a gentleman of the olden times!"

She caught his hand like a child and almost dragged him with her after Margot, who trotted ahead with a bunch of household keys. Chester felt more of a fool than ever,

but a fool in a dream. The bed-chamber was an unused room in the oldest portion of the house, but its four-post bed with tapestry curtains still stood as it must have stood in the eighteenth century, and the dim mirrors hung on its faded walls.

"Is it not a shame to waste these treasures?" Madame exclaimed as they walked about the room, examining the great chests and presses. "These things are full of clothes —moth-eaten, I am afraid. We will see. Sir Hugh never comes here, will not bother himself about it. Ayie!" Her mood suddenly veered to intense weariness. "I do not wonder! How *triste* this place is in the rain! I shall run away from it suddenly or I shall go mad. I have told Dr. Corney that I cannot hold out much longer. That is why he stays away. He hopes that I shall not be able to go without consulting him first. He will see!"

She flung open the door of the powder closet, peering into its musty recesses and sniffing daintily at the old dust. Margot took the opportunity to whisper to Chester that Madame was really very depressed, with the weather, the dullness, everything. It was a godsend his coming to-day in spite of the rain.

"But she is not really going yet, is she?" said Chester, as wistfully as a dog might look after a car that carries his owner away.

"Not till the summer ends, I hope and pray. It has done her much good, this place, though she is so restless. The doctor wants her to stay—hush! humour her. Do not talk of her leaving."

"Come, Mr. Chester—here are costumes for both of us!"

Madame had found the chests and succeeded in opening one of them. It was full of clothes, some of them actually falling to pieces with age and disuse, others of stouter materials merely faded and somewhat musty. She shook

out a full skirt and a high-waisted bodice, and with an instant eye for effect decided what would suit her and fit her best. But she could find nothing for Chester.

"I know there was an old Court suit—the sword is down in the smoking-room. Where was it? Ah, in that cupboard. Quick, Mr. Chester, open it for me or you will have caught that chill with waiting!"

As Chester turned the key in the lock and opened the door, something fell at his feet and he stepped on an old paste buckle before he could save it. "Ah! what a pity!" said Madame. "They are the real Bristol diamonds. But it cannot be helped. Here is the suit—I saw it before. Look—coat, waistcoat, breeches, the shoes, even the stockings are not too bad for Margot to mend them a little,—you will look fine carrying that cocked hat!" She mocked at him in her pretty manner, approving him, paying him a compliment even with her eyes. He stood silent, flushing, with the broken buckle in his hand, and—as she flung him out the clothes he was to wear—he mechanically slipped it into his pocket meaning to see if it could not be mended.

"Quick now, into your old room, out of your wet clothes, and into these fancy ones! Ring for one of the men when you have changed and he will take the wet clothes to be dried, and bring you some tea.

"Charge, Chester, charge! On, Stanley, on!—"

She issued the last order with a laughing reminiscence of the first time she had heard his name, but she was so much in earnest that her excitement communicated itself to him and he ran with the things in his arms and flung them down on the bed in which he had laid for those first days after the accident. He was so wet through that he was glad of a rough rub down with a bath towel before he

began to dress up, but his perplexing progress was hindered by Madame's gay voice across the landing calling to him from her own room.

"How are you getting on? Do they fit? For me, I find myself too large for this little lady's waist—I shall have to pin the bodice. . . . Bah! how they laced in those days. . . . Are you dressed, Mr. Chester? Has Margot brought you the stockings? And your tea? . . . Ask her to arrange your cravat—you need a jewel in it. Here! I will send you one. . . ."

A pause, and then Margot running to and fro from one room to another, bringing him a great gleaming emerald set as a brooch which she fastened into the white frills on his breast, making him anxious for its safety. He found the black velvet coat almost as good a fit as the hired dress-suit (Madame was a good judge!), and when he had pulled and wrestled himself into the unusual garments and Margot swung the glass round for him to see himself he could hardly look, he felt so sheepish. Stanley Chester in white silk stockings and buckled shoes (they pinched a bit) in knee breeches and a very short high waistcoat with a lot of frilly muslin above it and Madame's superb emerald gleaming in the midst! Stanley Chester with his golden hair and blue eyes and handsome tanned face suddenly transformed from a young commercial traveller and demonstrator of patent drills into a fop of the 1790's! He could not look at himself, but he did not feel exactly a fool because he was doing it for his lady's pleasure.

The dressing had taken some time, so that he emerged from his room just as Madame opened her own door. They met on the landing with a mutual laugh.

"But you are splendid!" she said, a little breathlessly, as if something disturbed even her perfect composure. "How becoming that costume is! Why do men wear such

17

stupid clothes nowadays when they might dress like that? I hope you are not uncomfortable in them—the coat is easy, yes? For me, I am all pins!"

He was tongue-tied as usual when she burst upon him suddenly. He wanted to tell her that the dress looked as if it belonged to her, but he did not know how to put it gracefully, and he could only look at her with unconscious homage in his eyes. She had dressed her auburn hair high on her head with clusters of little curls that fell round her eyes, and a wonderful ornament of pearl and gold thrust through the mass of it. Her dress consisted of a white crêpe petticoat embroidered in white beads, with a bodice so short that the waist was close under the breasts, and a lace handkerchief or fichu crossed over them leaving her neck bare. Possibly she had added the fichu to hide the discrepancies of the tight bodice, but he thought the effect awfully pretty. Her gown looked absurdly long after the present fashion and almost hid her little white slippers, and she carried a painted fan which she used with a turn of her wrist as the very essence of coquetry. The fan said more to him than her eyes or her lips had ever said at their most audacious. It dared him and provoked him, so that even his healthy moderate blood quickened in his veins and his gaze at her became warmer in spite of himself.

She swept him a curtsy to the very floor, recovered her poise instantly, and flirted the fan with new insolence.

"Now lay your hand on your heart, Mr. Chester—so! and bow to me. Lower. That is only a nod. You should bow almost to your knees."

He bent his bright head at her dictation so that she saw the natural ripple in the golden hair, and for a fleeting instant her eyes grew tragic. How young he was, and how nature had wasted her beauty on this second-rate, commonplace specimen of the English *bourgeoisie*! He was as

handsome as any beau of the period whose clothes he wore —and as innocent of breeding as a mongrel dog. But one can teach a mongrel more tricks than the animal with a pedigree.

"That is much better. You need not be afraid of toppling over! Bend your body from the waist. Now say to me 'Madam, may I have the honour to lead you in to dinner?' —and offer me your arm,—so!—with a flourish."

He had never had the privilege of having her on his arm, and it confused him. She had always led the way, as one whose rank is so undoubted that it waives ceremony. He stammered and flushed a little, and it was all the more becoming to the part he played, though he was cursing himself for a bally ass.

"Madame, may I have the honour——"

"Oh, but you have not bowed to me! You must bow first."

He laid his hand desperately on the short waistcoat, wishing that it were not so tight, and in his desire to get it over made a really magnificent bow.

"Madame, may I have the honour to lead you in to dinner?"

"Sir Stanley, I shall be happy!" She swept him another curtsy and laid her little delicate hand on his dark sleeve. It gave him a pang to see how thin her hands were—almost too thin for beauty. But the white skin and the pink filbert nails made him feel as if a shell were resting on his arm. He had always thought that a woman's hands should be plump and well manicured to be pretty; but Madame's hands were almost transparent, and not manicured at all. It was their shape and the care with which they were kept which made them lovely.

He led her down the white staircase and across the hall to the dining-room with the same mock state, though it

was she who carried the situation, bewildering him with references to routes and duels and my Lord Cheshire's snuffbox and what Lady Prudence had to say on the subject. That wicked fan kept catching his eye, touching his sleeve, urging him to some indiscretion that made him ashamed of himself; but before she quite withdrew her hand he had made the faintest movement to press it to his side—and wondered, panic-stricken, if she would snub him!

She did not appear to have noticed. Still talking and laughing she seated herself at the table and the solemn Indian servants began to serve the dinner. Then she started telling him tales of the Regency, and of Paris in the days before the Revolution and of the second Napoleon—how did she know?—and amused him as always when she chose to do so. They had not so much time together as usual, for as soon as his wet clothes were dried he must change into them to ride back the miles he had covered to see her; and perhaps because she felt that he would so soon be gone there was something a little different in her manner, more alluring, more possessive, than it had ever been, as if she made the most of a brief opportunity. It excited him more than the wine she insisted he should drink to prevent a chill, but less than the slight feeling of her hand against his heart for that one unprecedented moment. His own action had been so impulsive that it lingered with him, making his heart throb as if he still felt her hand there, or as if she actually laid it upon him of her own free will. He looked at her across the shaded lights of the dinner table—the evenings were drawing in—and his eyes were almost as black as his lashes with his unusual feeling. He had very thick lashes, thicker and darker than many women's. They were one of the very first things that Madame had noticed in his unconscious face when he lay at her feet nearly three months since.

"And your job will be over in this neighbourhood in a week or so?" she said to him at last when dinner was nearly done. "And then you will go back to Bristol? And the Summer will be over too!"

"Yes," he answered heavily. His elation left him suddenly with her musing words. In the wonderful things that had happened—the dressing up, her hand on his arm—he had almost forgotten that the time was short, and that all the play-acting was coming to an end. It had seemed like play-acting at first, but less and less as the weeks went on until to-day it had almost touched reality. "And you, Madame—you will be going away soon, I suppose?" he said jerkily.

She shrugged her shoulders and arranged the dainty laces at her breast with her jewelled fingers. He saw the rings flash in the lamplight as she did so. "These tiresome doctors!" she said, "Yes, I suppose I shall go. England is too *triste* in the rain."

"But it may be fine to-morrow!" he exclaimed, so eagerly that she laughed and raised her naughty fan again, furling and unfurling it before her silent, smiling lips. The fan said, "You wish to keep me? You dare not say so! You are a timid wooer, though you wear your brave clothes with such a dash." But her lips said nothing, and in the pause the sweet deliberate clock in the hall struck eight. They had dined early that he might not be too late in getting home. Madame dropped the fan with a little clatter and spoke in her usual careless, far-off manner.

"You must go, I suppose. Margot has all your wet things dried. Go and change, and Rennault shall bring your cycle to the front door that I may say good night to you. It has stopped raining, Heaven be praised."

He rose from the table as she did, feeling himself somehow dismissed. There was a sober look on his face which

was usually so alert and cheerful. He felt that the play was not quite played out, and that he had lost a privilege through his own stupidity, without knowing what it was. She made a gesture towards the stairs, and he ran up them in his strange clothes to change them for his own. He did not see if she went into the drawing room or the hall, but he hurried over his dressing in the fear that she would be tired of waiting. What was it that the fan had said to him ? What challenge was there in her silent, smiling lips ?

He came downstairs the ordinary, sensibly dressed cyclist, bereft of his ruffles and romance. But the reflection of it all was in his eyes as she came forward to meet him, still in her fancy gown.

"I hope you will not be tired to death to-morrow," she said a little languidly, holding out her hand. "It was so good of you to come in all that rain to see us ! Good night, Mr. Chester." He noticed that she no longer held the fan.

But his own blood was urging him madly in its stead. He took the tips of her fingers in his square hard palm, and bending his head kissed them with awkward suddenness. He did not want the gallant dress or the temptation of her smile to teach him to do that. It came straight out of his stupid, blunt manhood, the only desperate sign he had given of his feeling about her. For a minute his lips were touching her, for the first time, and then without another word, either of apology or excuse or avowal, he was mounting his prosaic machine and puffing and panting down the drive under the dripping trees.

Perhaps Madame knew that he could not speak. She stood still a minute in the hall, hearing him go away, and her face was unnecessarily startled for such a minor offence. So many men must have kissed her hand, on one pretext or another, that she had little cause for annoyance or

surprise that this middle-class young man should have taken a liberty. If she were just she must have admitted that she had given him enough temptation to have been far bolder and to have risked offence. But he had only touched her hand with lips that trembled.

* * * * *

The rain had been the death of Summer, and from that Sunday the days were crisper and colder with the advance of early Autumn. Chester was finishing his work in the quarries, and had been very successful for his firm. He had reason to be pleased and satisfied with himself, and with one side of his character he was so, the same side that still looked upon May Ponting as a pretty girl and thought of her as a possible wife in the vague future when he might want to settle down. The future had become more vague, that was all. Another side of his character had slowly developed, and it was a side that might have lain dormant all his life had not romance touched him and awakened it.

He did not see Madame Biscombe for a week after the wet Sunday, nor did he hear from her. Sometimes he was dismayed at his own boldness in kissing her hand ("cheek" was the word in his mind) and afraid that she was offended. He never ceased to wonder what she had thought of him and half dreaded meeting her again, and yet was restless with an indefinite delight in the memory. The following Sunday was a fair calm day, without wind, but with a nip of Autumn in the air. He could not make up his mind that he was going to Biscombe until he found himself fairly on the road, and even then he was silly enough to cheat himself by saying that he might ride round by Blagdon or cut through to the Polden Hills in the opposite direction. But when the road forked to these two points, or went on the more familiar way, he found that he never

hesitated and began to ride faster once the decision was taken.

The quiet road lay between reaped fields and hedges where the briony was already turning to glowing red and orange and yellow and jade green, like the beads that women wear round their necks. There was something sad to Chester in the soft mellow day and the increasing warmth as the sun drew up the mists. He kept on saying to himself "The Summer is over—she will be going away soon—the Summer is over. It's been no harm, but it's over," though he never really felt it until he dismounted from his cycle and pushed it inside the great iron gates of High Biscombe. Then a sense of loss fell upon him and he knew that the place was deserted long before he came in sight of the house with its lowered blinds and closed doors. He stood still as he had done when he first came there, and then he saw old Crust the gardener coming up from the orchard—the same where he had slept in the hammock tent—with a basket of golden apples in his hand. Chester went to meet him with a civility he had learned to practise on the old man under Madame's intuition.

"Good morning, Mr. Crust. I just took a spin over, it was such a fine day. What's up? Are they all out?"

"They're gone," said the gardener shortly. "Went two days ago. And I hope Sir Hugh won't let the 'ouse to a lot of foreigners again. I've been the only one here as could speak decent English for three months!"

"Madame Biscombe speaks English perfectly," said Chester hotly.

"No, she doesn't, she speaks French to that old cook-nurse 'alf the time, and their own lingo to black men, and French again to the chauffeur; and when she does speak English, as she calls it, it's like reading it out of a

book. It don't come natural to 'er, you can see that." He broke off his sour criticism to add, "'ere's the doctor, 'e come over for something 'e left."

Chester wheeled round to see Dr. Corney's broad bow-kneed figure coming out of the side entrance. He always walked with a movement as if he still controlled a pulling horse. The two men met in the drive, and Crust made off to his own cottage with a surly touch to his hat.

"I hear that they are gone!" said Chester blankly. He was too taken aback by the news to collect himself. He did not even realise his disaster.

"Yes, they got off at a minute's notice," said Corney in his off-hand manner. "Madame wouldn't stay any longer, though the old woman was upset about it. I knew she'd flit one of these days. She was bored stiff, and she wouldn't stick it another hour. Well, you couldn't expect it considering the life she's led!"

Chester could realise that. He wondered if Dr. Corney were in the secret of what he suspected about her rank. But he stood there, facing the older man, with his handsome face as unemotional as he could make it.

"You know who she was, I suppose?" said Corney carelessly. "Marie Morelle, the greatest courtesan in Europe for these twenty years past. *The* greatest. That woman's had a career, and she's not much over forty now. She's been the mistress of three sovereigns as well as statesmen of the highest rank. But she'll snuff out if she doesn't look to it. Lived on her nerves, and they're gone. Another year or so will see the end of Marie."

Perhaps he had a shrewd suspicion that the young man staring at him in the autumn sunshine did not know all the truth and had better be informed. He had never entirely approved of Stanley Chester's presence in Madame's intimate circle, on which of course he put the usual

masculine construction. But such women must have their toys. The man was young and healthy and good-looking. His class would not matter to the great courtesan if he pleased her. Dr. Corney did not either see or understand the horror looking out at him from Chester's blue eyes.

"Was she not Sir Hugh Biscombe's cousin?" was all he said.

"No! Not a bit of it. She stood in a much nearer relation to him as a girl, I should say. I'm told he was the first man to seduce her when she was about fifteen. He's an old rip, but he'd enough sentiment to lend her the house down here when he heard how she'd gone to pieces and wanted a rest. I don't suppose he minded her calling herself his cousin, either."

"Anyhow, they were very kind to me, she and her French servant," said Chester hoarsely. Three months ago he would not have remembered to be courteous even to a memory. Marie Morelle, notorious lady of light fame as she might be, had taught him something.

"Oh aye, you were a favourite, young man! You ought to be very proud of yourself. I tell you a good many of the aristocracy would have given a fortune for the *entrée* into Madame's innermost circle that you got for nothing. By the bye, there's a note for you, should you come over." He felt in the multitudinous pockets of a doctor's coat and finally discovered it with his stethoscope, handing it to Chester with some curiosity in his glance. But the young man's face was as a blank wall.

"I say, do you think I might walk round the place again?" was all he said. "I like the gardens, and I don't suppose I shall be allowed in by the old gardener when the house is empty."

"By all means—I'm sure you may," said the doctor

carelessly. He was a little baulked by Chester's manner and his very ordinary request. "I must be off—I only came in for this—" patting the stethoscope. "Good-bye, Chester. Feel no ill effects from your spill now?"

"None at all, thank you, doctor."

The two shook hands, perfunctorily. Then Dr. Corney strode off down the drive as if he still imagined a horse between his legs, and Chester turned slowly in the direction of the south garden . . . where he had first seen her.

He sat down on one of the grassy steps and opened the little note. The place was so deserted that there was no one to see him but the white peacocks furling and unfurling their jewelled tails in the soft sunshine. The note was the merest graceful farewell, a few words thanking him for his friendship and companionship and regretting not seeing him again—"but perhaps that is as well. We should have to say good-bye, and I would rather leave it as it is—a memory." That was the only vague reference to the last time they met and his kiss upon her hand. (The first and last time he had kissed her hand!) The letter was merely signed Marie Biscombe.

He put the note away carefully, in his pocket-book, amongst some money and a few business papers. To him they were all valuables. As he did so he pulled out something that fell at his feet on the grassy step and sparkled in the sunlight. It was the broken shoe buckle of Bristol diamonds that he had failed to get mended in the little towns where he had last been, and which he had brought back. The sight of the thing brought all the fun and folly vividly to his mind, the memory of himself in black velvet and of her in white crêpe, and her hand on his arm, against his heart—only a week ago. His face still looked dazed as he tried to realise it all. But it was very simple. She had indeed known the great personages of whom she

talked to him—known them as only a woman can know men who stand in the most intimate relation to her. She had never been so indiscreet as to refer to present-day royalties except in casual, witty comment—but he could guess. Her attitude to himself was still more easily explained. It had not mattered who he was so long as he amused her. If he had no position, she had none. It was no wonder that none of the people living near her in their own large houses had called at High Biscombe! She was cut off socially from the narrow provincial set, though she had known everybody in Society in London or Paris—known them in a way, yes, even the women. Her light manner, her careless intimacy with himself, her moments of familiarity, could only have belonged to a princess—or a courtesan. He remembered her wanton movements with the fan last Sunday, and wondered if she had meant to invite him? Perhaps he might even have been her lover for a short space, one of so many that he did not count. She must have thought him a fool when he hardly dared to kiss her hand!

But it was not the physical loss that hurt so much as the mental, for the woman he had adored had been a great lady and he had never wished to do anything but worship. She had not looked for worship so much as conquest. He saw the difference now. But to him she had been royal. . . .

He dropped his head forward suddenly in his hands, and cried as bitterly as if he had been a child.

IX

NOTHING

"Where there is nothing, there is God."
W. B. Yeats.

It being Sunday morning neither of the men had gone to play golf as usual. But neither had they gone to church. George Hessletine, indeed, had walked over to the club house to overlook the secretary's room (left empty since the death of Digby White) and some of the neglected work. If it had not been for the appalling muddle in which the affairs of the Club had been plunged by White's sudden illness, Hessletine would never have done this on a Sunday morning. He was too conventional. But the Golf Club had been his hobby ever since it was opened, and he was mainly responsible for the links in that neighbourhood. He had grown so restless at the state of the Club finances, and the way in which White had discharged his duties, that he could talk of nothing else; until his wife said, "Do go to the Club, George. It is better to be doing something than to fret,"—and he went.

Left to himself by his friend's desertion, Rowland Allen wandered about the bungalow for a bit and wondered why he felt vaguely uncomfortable. He was staying with the Hessletines for some golf as he often did, and without golf he felt that the place was somehow intolerable. Nobody ever stayed at the Hessletines' unless they played golf, and with that motive-power it had seemed to him much as other houses; except that it was a pity that Hessletine did not get on better with his wife. He was disagreeable to her, downright nasty at times, and she had an ironic

way of keeping silence that seemed to make him worse. Allen had never asked himself outright whose fault it was, but he had a feeling of pity for the woman, though it had originally been George who was his friend. He had known George for years, and the ins and outs of his character, before he married. Allen found himself strongly of opinion that he should not have married—not that type of woman. Mrs. Hessletine was both beautiful and young, but she did not seem very strong—of late. He remembered that she had played golf when she first married, and played rather well, but she had gradually given it up and each time he came to the house she seemed more and more listless, and less enthusiastic about life. There were no children, so it was not that. Or perhaps it was that, and she missed them. He could not tell, she talked so little except about current topics. He was only aware of the growing unhappiness in the atmosphere, and it had begun to infect him so much that he told himself this should be his last visit.

The morning had been intensely hot and still, even for July. Allen walked about the pretty rooms wondering if there were going to be a thunder-storm, though the air was quite clear and the barometer was steady. It would be unpleasantly hot to play golf this afternoon, even if Hessletine suggested a game. What a bother it must have been Digby White dying so suddenly, and all the arrears of work and the lack of method he had left behind! Poor old George was practically secretary till they could get another. Allen was growing tired of the sound of Digby White's name, but it was on Hessletine's lips all day when he was at home. What a bore for everybody! What a bore for his wife!

Mrs. Hessletine was not down yet; she rarely made her appearance before eleven. They had breakfasted at nine,

for George to go to the Club early. Allen began to wish he had gone with him and read the papers there. If it had not been so hot he would have started out for a walk. It might be cooler, anyhow, in the woods that lay half a mile off across the fields. They looked inviting.

As he crossed the drawing-room to the hall to get his hat he saw that Esther Hessletine had made her appearance at last. She was sitting at the writing-table in the bay, with the windows open and the sunblinds down. The sun, shining through the shadow of the blind, made a dusky glory for her white figure and dark hair. He stopped on his way, to greet her.

"Good morning. I hope your head is better?"

"Oh, no worse, at any rate," she said indifferently. "The night was stifling."

"Yes. Do you think there is thunder about?"

She lifted her graceful head and looked with large indifferent eyes at the slit of summer sky and landscape between the blinds. "No, I think it's a heat wave," she said. "Were you going for a walk? I am afraid you will be very hot."

"Only into the woods." He hesitated for a moment, oddly. "Will you come too?" he said.

She paused also, but her pause seemed to him much more deliberate. "No, I think not, thanks," she said quietly. "What is the use?"

"You mean it won't be any cooler?"

She did not answer in words, but she turned her head again as if to look out of the window at the obvious blaze of summer. Her silence was often more significant than her speech. He looked at the lines of her dark head and neck where the rich hair clustered round her ears, and at the slope of her shoulders and long back. Her whole figure was expressive of intense weariness or discourage-

ment, and that sense of unhappiness pervaded him again until it reached a climax and broke in his consciousness like a great firework. The sensation was really that of a rocket that goes up into the sky and descends in a shower of blazing particles. The revelation staggered him so that it made him blink physically, and he hurried out of the room like a man in the dark, so that he knocked against pieces of furniture and fumbled with the door for his liberty.

He was out of the hall and across the garden before he could even think or regain his balance. He had hurried so that as he crossed the fields he felt the moisture roll down his face, and he took his hat off and wiped his forehead. It had come before him indeed like a rocket blinding him, or like a clap of thunder deafening him for a moment, and he wanted to get command of himself to realise and face it.

He loved her, that was all. The disquietude in her presence, the wretched feeling of discomfort, the unhappiness that he had attributed to her relations with George, were all explained by the sudden revelation. He worshipped her, body and soul, and she was his friend's wife.

He was not particularly primitive in his ideals, but it struck him as a disgrace to his manhood, and he was so ashamed that he found himself saying aloud, "At least she does not know it. Thank God that she does not even suspect it!" Not thank God that *he* does not know it, or suspect it, my friend. He knew that he would never do his friend any wrong, however indifferent George might be to his wife, however strained their relations to each other. Rowland Allen was himself a bachelor, and no more moral than Nature intended; but he could not cheat his friend. And he knew that George would resent such

treachery no less because he was himself indifferent to Esther.

"She has never shown me any particular favour. She does not know—she need never know," he said to himself, and with the thought came a delicious relief. "Then I need not leave the house at once—I need not deny myself the joy of hearing and seeing her!" He knew now that it would be a joy, a secret joy that would take the place of the old unrest, and he wondered if he could trust himself to look at her without betraying it? But even if he did, what would it matter? She was not likely to be upset by a feeling she did not return, and he could not imagine her interested in him enough to be disturbed by his presence. That tragic, still beauty of hers and the folded sadness of her lips must have drawn other men to love her, but he had never heard a breath of scandal, had never even known George jealous. Her secret trouble, whatever it was, could not be light love.

As Allen entered the woods he was aware of the relief from the glare outside them, but of no greater coolness. It was very still and close, and he walked on aimlessly following one wood track after another, simply to keep time with his racing thoughts. When was it that he first fell in love with Esther? That day that her eyes had looked like shadows in a clear pool, until the waters rose and drowned them? (He had never known why she cried, and he thought no one else had seen her.) Or the day they stood up on the golf course together and he saw her figure silhouetted against the sunset, the wind drawing lines of her body through her thin dress? She did not often come to the golf course—it was no wonder he remembered that day. Or was it this last visit when she picked the red roses and wore them in her breast, then plucked them out before they could droop and put them in a bowl of

water? "I can't bear to see flowers die—it somehow seems to me like murder!" she had said, and smiled, and her smile had lifted the tired lips to sudden tenderness.

But when had he not loved her! His blood tingled and glowed in his veins to think of her, and he wanted to shout her name abroad to the brooding silence of the woods, and his own enslavement. It would be impossible not to betray this passion to her,—more, he must tell her of it. It was too great a thing to hold alone.

He did not know how or when he threw himself down on the moss, and pressed his fevered mouth to the cool greenness. He only knew that he lay there, praying, and that the agony of self-denial was like tearing something out of festered flesh. "I mustn't—I mustn't," he kept on saying huskily. "Why should I trouble her peace? And George—no, Rowland Allen, not such a cad!"

So he would have to leave the bungalow after all, and never come there again unless the years dulled all feeling to a safe apathy. It was only what he had been promising himself this morning, that he would never visit the Hesseltines again. Strange. But how different!

He rose to his feet again and walked on stiffly like a man in a trance. He had hardly noticed that he had reached the outskirts of the wood, and was coming through the last scattered trees to open ground, when it happened.

The earth stopped suddenly, before his feet. It actually stopped, not two inches before him, like a chasm, and he stopped also, his feet close together, so that he stood upon the brink of nothing.

He could not look across the chasm because there was no other side. He had come to the end of the world, but he was not looking into the firmament, because there was no firmament. The whole system of the Universe, as

scientifically understood by Man, had been blotted out, and there was neither ether, nor sun, nor planets. If he had not been paralysed at the moment of realisation, if he had drawn a breath, he would have toppled over into nothing.

He was afraid to turn his head to see if the earth was still behind him as he had left it, though he could feel it, solid, under his feet. Before him was Nothing, neither shape nor colour nor motion nor sound. Nothing. He stood rigid, afraid to move lest one sway, one tremble, should precipitate him forward. A great fear that he was going to faint or to be sick possessed all his senses, and with a supreme effort of will he held his nerves steady and his eyes looking straight ahead at the incredible.

He stood there for an eternity, since time like the world was behind him. Then with braced muscles he drew one foot a fraction backwards from the brink, his body poised to a nicety of balance to combat his own movement. He dared not throw himself back for fear of his feet slipping forward over that unspeakable end of all things, and being unable to recover himself. By degrees his other foot followed the first, but so slightly that he seemed in the same spot. So he moved until he had regained an inch. Centuries. Before him still there was nothing. He had regained three feet before he dared to fall, and then a vast giddiness helped him and he was crawling on his belly like the lowest form of life until his outstretched hand touched the roots of a tree; and with the touch came a revulsion of safety that twisted his body into strange writhings with the shock of deliverance.

He crawled like an animal until he felt the friendly roots beneath him, and looked up with bloodshot eyes at the branches above. Wave after wave of nausea convulsed him until he had been so sick that his strength was

exhausted and he lay inert, unable to think or move, but not yet mercifully unconscious.

Man, so far, had always rested on the fact that there is no new thing under the sun. To find the thing that is new, for which there is no precedent, staggered and blinded the intellect.

Rowland Allen had come to the end of existence, and found Nothing. His brain, beginning to revolve on itself, understood too clearly that everything that he had been taught and accepted as knowledge existed in the minds of men who had conceived it. The whole system of the Universe, endlessly repeated even to the conception of the atom, was a circle in the brain. It had no beginning or ending, it existed in the mind of Man. All the rest of the wonderment of science, all discovery and all research, was a part of the circle. Outside of it was Nothing. He had reached Nothing and escaped it by a hair's breadth.

Death, however indefinite, had got a name and a place. Man had classified the Beyond, according to his own theory, and was convinced that he knew something while proclaiming that he could not know. Every other human being in the Universe believed in the definite as exemplified in the Universe. But this, that belied the Universe, could not be definite, because it was Nothing. He could get thus far. Nothing.

After a long time he rose to his feet by grasping at things, friendly twigs and saplings and branches of the trees that helped him upright, and with the positive support of the material world he regained his manhood and crawled no longer on the earth. But in his weakness he reeled and staggered to and fro like a drunken man, so that his progress through the woods was slow and wandering, and beset with nightmare fear that he had followed the circle in his brain and might come back to the place from which

he had escaped. The trees were thicker, which was his only guide and hope, and at last the swoon came for which he had waited and he fell again and lay on the kindly earth, all experience wiped out in oblivion.

* * * * *

The Nurse in her clean white linen was an established fact, she had been there for so long. And the bottles on the table kept their order pretty well, except when the Nurse took one up and put it down in another place, which was annoying. Everything in the room was settled and definite and only to be altered by the will of the human beings who had made and could take it away. The brain of the sick man rested on these things exactly as his body rested on the bed, and the brain gained confidence as the body gained health.

The only thing in the room that came and went was Esther Hessletine, and she was not to be depended upon like the Nurse and the medicine and the daylight that increased and decreased at the windows. Sometimes she was sitting in a low chair reading or working, and sometimes she was walking out of the room. But once at least, whenever she was in the room, she was looking at the sick man with contemplative eyes, as if she saw something there that was not only a body lying on a bed.

Rowland Allen had accepted her at first as he had the Nurse, and the room and all the rest of it, except that he found that she brought healing with her beyond all remedies. When she was sitting there looking at him he was so content that his mind seemed to hold nothing else but her strange stillness, and when she left him he could always go to sleep. There had been other people in the room, at times, so much more disturbing that he was restless for hours afterwards. A doctor, who leaned over him and

looked at his eyes and asked him if he felt the light too strong. George Hessletine, who stood at the end of his bed and talked nonsense. "Well, you've had a nasty jar, old man. I expect you'll be up soon and beating me at the tenth as usual." And Down, Hessletine's own man, who came in to help the Doctor to lift him on to a couch while the bed was made—but that was later. Down said, "Hope you're getting better, sir. Sunstroke's a nasty thing—had it myself." That was the first time that he heard that they had given him sunstroke.

Esther never spoke to him, though she gave him his medicine when Nurse was not there and moved his pillows for him; so at last he spoke to her.

"Who found me?" he said.

"Down," she answered at once. "We had had search parties out for hours."

"What time was it?"

"Ten o'clock at night."

"In the wood?"

"Yes. About a mile from here."

He thought for some minutes and then he said, "What was I doing?"

"You were lying on your face, unconscious."

"Yes—I suppose I fell," said Allen quietly. "Is it long ago?"

"About three weeks."

Then the Nurse came in with Benger's Food and Esther left him; and as always when she left him he fell asleep, and the Benger's Food grew cold.

But Esther went through the bungalow to the dining-room, where her husband was mixing himself a gin and bitters before dinner.

"Well?" he said carelessly. "Rowland any better?"

"He has been trying to talk——"

"That's an improvement. He's lain there like a log for weeks. What did he say?"

"He wanted to know who found him, and where. And he said that he fell——"

"Of course he fell. A man who has a fit or a stroke or heat apoplexy generally does fall. Did he say when he began to feel queer? Does he remember anything?"

"I think he remembers—something. But not that. Dr. Corney thinks it was sunstroke?"

"Of course it was sunstroke. A man goes for a walk in a heat wave and gets a touch of sun, and isn't found till dark. He must have been lying there for hours."

Mrs. Hessletine suddenly shivered—a most unusual display of nerves for her.

"What I want to know is how long is he to be laid up here," grumbled her husband. "He's doing no good—not likely to play golf again this summer, poor devil. His blood pressure is all wrong—Corney says so. He's got a sister—she ought to come and look after him and take him away."

"She did offer to when we first wrote and told her of this—accident."

"I know she did, but that's three weeks ago. And I've got this new man coming down to take White's place—at last!—and nowhere to put him. Of course I don't want to turn poor old Rowland out, but you can see for yourself that it's deuced awkward."

"The new Secretary will have to go to the Dormy House."

"A mile off! I want him here, on the spot, to show him the ropes. Anyone but a woman, and a fool, would see that!"

"Shall I write to Rowland's sister again?"

"What's the use, till Corney says he can be moved?"

"I suppose he could be moved by ambulance to a nursing home."

"And get a relapse and possibly die. He's my oldest pal. Upon my word, Esther, I think you have less heart even than brains!"

Mrs. Hessletine did not argue. She never did. It was one of her husband's grievances against her. But Rowland himself solved the problem by getting better and showing a sudden desire to remove the burden of himself and his convalescence from the Hessletines' house with an urgency that the doctor deprecated. "All in good time," he said. "Give yourself a chance. You've had a nasty turn. Been working up for it for some time, I expect—haven't you?"

Rowland did not know. All he knew was that he was desirous of getting away where before he had been perfectly quiescent. For with his returning consciousness to life the thrill of Esther's presence was returning also. She no longer soothed him, she made him maddeningly aware of her personality, and it tortured him. He could not keep his eyes from the door through which she might come, or look at her when she did, for fear of what she might read in them. The knowledge that had come to him that day in the woods was not altered by his later experience; it grew upon him until it screamed danger in his ears. He loved her so raveningly that he could only trust himself to leave her while some shred of self-respect and self-control was left to him.

He thought that perhaps the fatality of her having nursed him might have been his undoing, and as soon as he was able to leave his room he announced his speedy departure to both host and hostess, his eyes avoiding Esther's inscrutable beauty, his voice addressed to George fussing over the Club papers at the writing table.

"Don't you hurry, old man—don't you go till the doc. says you're just It," said Hessletine heartily.

"But I'm well enough to go to Bournemouth by car or the South Coast somewhere." Allen's voice was feverish. "I've been here so long--jolly good of you to put me up—I've been a dashed nuisance. Taken your only spare room too!"

Mrs. Hessletine turned her head swiftly and looked at her husband, who was sealing a letter. She knew perfectly well that it was to the new secretary asking him definitely in Allen's place, and she did not add her own entreaties to him to outstay his welcome. Polite lies had never appealed to her, but they were George's speciality.

"I daresay Bournemouth would set you up," he was saying with badly masked relief. "But don't you hurry, old chap. You listen to the doctor. And I could drive over to Ferndown and have a game with you when you're fit for it."

"I shall go on Thursday," said Allen wildly. "It is absurd to pretend that I am an invalid still. I feel fit to walk ten miles." His loud emphasis startled himself, and he dared not look at Esther to see if she were startled also. Then George left the room laughing and saying, "Good for you, Rowly,—you're going it!" and took all sense of noise and bravado with him.

The two left in the sunny parlour of the bungalow were instantly aware of great quiet and gravity. It was still warm summer weather at the end of July, though not hot as it had been at the beginning. Esther was wearing a white gown strewn with flowers, and a knot of cool green ribbon at her breast. It made her look very young, and he was glad to have that picture of her to remember. This, he felt, was their real parting—not next Thursday

or the days between. He had forced himself to a definite date as a seal to his renouncement.

She leaned forward deliberately and looked up with eyes which seemed to him to hold the curiosity of an awed child.

"Tell me what really happened to you in the woods!" she said.

Her attack was deliberate, but the suddenness of it, to him, made him helpless, and a faint reflex of his agony was in his gaze as she recalled it to his mind.

"You would not believe me if I told you," he said. "It is incredible——"

"Yes, I should—if you told me."

"It is better for you to believe what the doctor says—sunstroke, a fit, blood pressure."

"I want the truth. What happened to you? What did you find?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

Her voice wondered on the word, as if she found more enlightenment in it than its mere acceptance. "Where did you find—nothing?" she said.

"At the end of the woods—the other side. What *is* beyond the woods?"

"I don't remember. I have never been there all the time we have lived here. I meant to go. I have started to go once or twice, but something always happened to prevent me or turned me back. So I have never walked straight through them."

"But there must be a locality—for you. What do other people say lies beyond them?"

"I think there is a rough heath. There is no road that one can ride or drive, I know, or we should have been there. You can drive round those woods, out to Stand-

bourne and that district, but you cannot drive through them to the other end." She paused a minute and added, "I don't remember ever hearing of anyone who had been straight through, except you. Did you go right through?"

"Yes."

"You are shivering as if with fear or delight. What *did* you find?"

"If I tell you that, I shall have to tell you something else,—why I took that walk."

"You hurried out of the bungalow. I saw you cross the garden as if you were blind. You seemed to walk aimlessly, as if you had had a shock that had unhinged you. I wondered since if you felt ill then."

"Not ill. But I was mad. I had discovered—in one minute—that I worshipped you . . . George's wife! . . ."

She did not speak a word, her very breath seemed hushed. He fancied that she was as amazed as he had been to realise his passion for her, and he remembered that he had himself felt stunned. He went on speaking in a level voice as if the least raising of the tone might have lost him his control and made him fall at her feet.—He told her of his walk through the woods without object except to escape from his own thoughts. He did not know the direction he took, but he remembered throwing himself down and praying for strength not to betray himself. (He thought her face quivered then, and marvelled at her pity and understanding.) He told her how he rose to his feet again and wandered on, to the outskirts of the trees; and then of how he came to Nothing.

He did not try to explain the incredible, he simply told her. She listened with her face buried in her hands, and he could not tell if she were shocked, or afraid, or simply regarded him as still suffering from the effects of some

injury to his brain. His voice sounded to himself hopelessly leaden as he ended.

"That is what happened to me, whether you believe it or no. I must have been some hours getting back, even to the middle of the woods. If you think I went off my head for love of you, I cannot blame you. It was that began it—it is that ends it. For I have thought sometimes, since I was ill, that I would walk through the woods again and find the place, and instead of drawing back inch by inch, just take one step forward."

She lifted her face from her hands and then he saw that the tears were running down it, and he thought again of the shadows in her eyes like the shadows in brown pools and the water rising and drowning them.

"Don't do that!" he said hoarsely. "Don't cry for me. It would be happier—far happier—than going on through life—without you!"

"You don't understand——" She spoke through her tears. "Why don't you understand? I love you,—and you have known of this escape for both of us all these weeks and kept it to yourself, for yourself!——"

"Both of us!" he said breathlessly. "You would come—there—with me?"

"Both of us." She showed far more composure than he. "I would go with you to the world's end, but the wrong would come too. I would go with you into nothing, where wrong cannot be."

He thought a minute, gaspingly. "You know that George would think the other thing—that we had gone away together 'to the world's end'?"

"It is better that George should think it than that it should be true," she said quietly.

He rose up and held out his hand to her. "Will you come—now?" he said.

For one minute of doubt he thought it was a test, and that she might hang back, plead for time. He did not love her one whit the less, but he wanted to give her choice. She never faltered for an instant, but rising also took his hand and looked into his eyes.

"Are you sure that you can find the way?" was all she said.

"I feel sure," he answered, and a flame of life and love and complete belief in her leapt in his eyes.

They walked out of the house into the sunny garden, then and there, by much the same track that Rowland had taken before. He walked slowly, but he did not falter, and she still held his hand in her own. Through the private gate into the fields where the natural, material world was all about them and breathed sweet odours. They might have been going for a country walk, to gather flowers, to look at the new cut hay, drying and dying in the sun. When they had entered the woods the same deep shade took them and enfolded them, and amongst the great trunks and bosky undergrowth he stopped and took her face in his hands.

"We may kiss each other here," he said, and she knew that it was their sanctuary to which he led her from the bondage of her husband's house. Their hearts met with their lips, and he felt the shadow of her longing for him pass and leave them in union. The unhappiness he had sensed in her was only the mute passion behind her grieved silence, unsatisfied and uncompleted. He wondered how he could have been so blind.

They walked on through the wood hand in hand, like two children, without speaking and without further embrace. When the trees began to thin and scatter, his hand pressed hers closer, to reassure her, and felt hers press his again in response. It was firm, and cool, and

only responsive to his own. He saw, as suddenly as before, that they had reached the end. They did not look at each other. Before them, almost under their feet, was nothing, neither ether, nor planets, nor the Universe that man had made in his brain. Nothing. They took a step forward.

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